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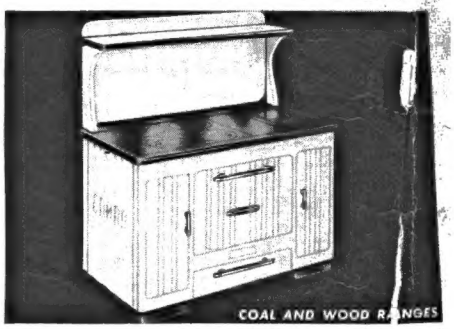
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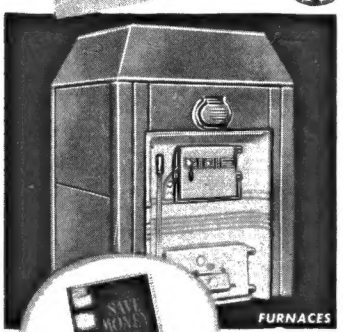
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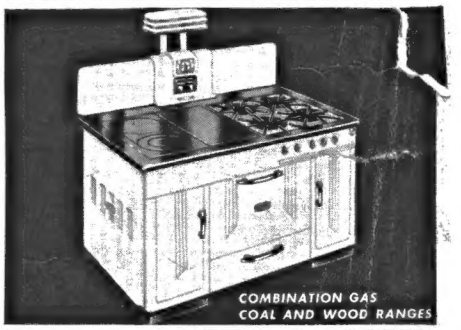
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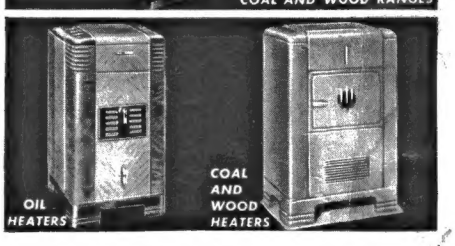

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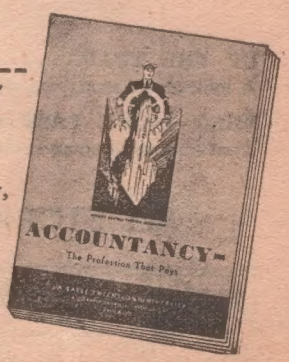

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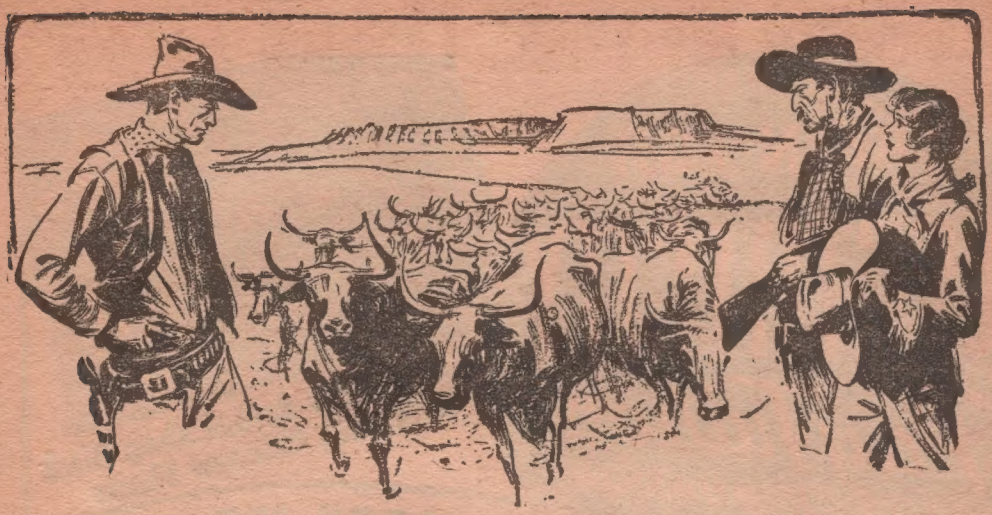

Up The Trail

LIKE a great many other people, we happen to have been born and raised in a relatively small town, a thousand or more miles from where we now work and live. Also like other folks, we never seem to have the time or the money to get back as often as we'd like, to see the kids we used to play scrub with in the vacant lot, or the bunch we used to know during our high-school days. Nor can we quite believe that Joe, Divvy, Hawk-Eye and the rest are getting a little gray and thin as to hair, and very likely thicker around the waistline. We'd like to see them, to talk over old times—but foolishly we never seem to get around to taking the train and spending a vacation back there.

But we are going back to see the old bunch. Because one of them came into the office the other day and told us there was sort of a reunion scheduled for next summer. It would give us a chance to catch up with the really important things of life—which, after all, are the friends that you've made and kept for more years than you care to remember.

And it occurred to us suddenly that editing a magazine like *Star Western* is something like going to a reunion of old friends. For in it, we've tried to keep the characters we know and like appearing from time to time. It's strange, too, how lifelike and real such gents as—for example—old Hoss Greer can be. Probably Harry Olmsted based the character of that loveable, crotchety old rancher on some bluff, loyal man he's known, or perhaps worked under on a ranch. Or, there's Bullwhip Bill McCrackin, that "hell-roaring, blustering old bat" who's never quite happy unless he's riding into more trouble than most of us face in our lifetime.

Things are looking up for a real reunion here in *Star Western* next issue. Remember Johnny—the drifting bronc-peeler who talks mighty slow and easy, but acts like he's swallowed a chunk of chain lightning? And his kid orphan partner, Two-Bits, who would rather starve and fight beside Johnny than go to the best school in the world? We have Wes Fargo's promise that they'll be on hand to meet the rest of the folks, in a new and dramatic adventure.

Bob Mahaffay's wired us from the Coast that Deacon Bottle's headed this way in time to join the festivities—so we're seeing that there's a supply of Old Pepper on hand to grease the way for one of the Deacon's best preachments.

Hoss Greer isn't going to miss this reunion number—though he's never been very far away from us. Any old-timer who can do what he did in "Hoss Greer Is the Law"—when he made a shirt-tail parade of three tough gunnies, and marched them down the street of a tough cowtown. . . . Well, we'd like to see plenty of him!

Maybe some of the new-comers among the readers won't recall a Border-hopper named Silver Trent. Silver it was who used to have an entire magazine named after him—until we found him such an interesting character that we took him into the *Star Western* family. Silver, according to Stone Cody, will be riding again with his old bunch along the star-lit Rio. And, señores, that Robin Hood outlaw never stops to wonder about the odds if a small rancher who once befriended him gets in a tight. Silver will be right there—and if he dies, he won't die alone!

So there, gents, we have what we hope will be our "Reunion Issue." Added to the old friends we already know, there will be other novels and characters plus the usual features, which carry the same tensely dramatic and colorful flavor of the Open West.

All in all, gents, a well-balanced fiction meal! And May grub-pile's ready on April 5th!

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Jobs Like These Go to Men Who Know Radio

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, technicians and pay well for trained men. Radio manufacturers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, servicemen in good pay jobs with opportunities for advancement. Radio jobbers and dealers employ installation and servicemen. Many Radio Technicians open their own Radio sales and repair businesses and make $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 a week fixing Radios in spare time. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio; loudspeaker systems, electronic devices, are newer fields offering good opportunities to qualified men. And my Course includes Television, which promises to open many good jobs soon.

Why Many Radio Technicians Make $30, $40, $50 a Week

Radio is already one of the country's large industries even though it is still young and growing. The arrival of Television, the use of Radio principles in industry, are but a few of many recent Radio developments. More than 28,000,000 homes have one or more Radios. There are more Radios than telephones. Every year millions of Radios get out of date and are replaced. Millions more need new tubes, repairs, etc. Over 5,000,000 auto Radios are in use and thousands more are being sold every day. In every branch Radio is offering more opportunities—opportunities for which I give you the required knowledge of Radio at home in your spare time. Yes, the few hundred $30, $40, $50 a week jobs of 20 years ago have grown to thousands.

Many Make $5 to $10 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll, in addition to my regular course, I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets which start showing you how to do actual Radio repair jobs. Throughout your Course, I send plans and directions which have helped many make from $200 to $500 a year in spare time while learning.

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Wild Jack's Last Gun-Play

IT HAS been said that the history of Wild Jack Kelly was largely written in the hot lead of his guns, and in the blood of the men he killed. Which observation would have pleased Wild Jack, for he bore a keen appreciation of his own gun-skill. For Wild Jack, besides being a sure-thing killer, was a showman—from the long hair which came to his buckskin-clad shoulders to the famous ivory-handled guns which swung from his lean hips. None but Wild Jack would have indulged his grisly sense of humor to the extent of burying, whenever possible, his own dead, complete with grave and headboard, with the victim's name, date of demise—and the initials "JK" neatly carved below. At times this fancy led to Wild Jack's riding out of town very fast; at other times it won him glory and bounty-money.

Yet, the cattle country was vague as to what became of that nonpariel gunman after he had left prison one wild night in 1879. Three years passed, and his reputation was still recalled, as if waiting for the man himself to claim it.

Late one night in 1882, in the cowtown of Rawhide, certain substantial citizens met secretly in the house of the banker. A faded reward dodger, showing a cut of Wild Jack's features was passed around. Men nodded, looked again, and argued. Next day they appeared at the door of the marshal's office.

Marshal Bill Henry smiled when they showed him the photograph. True, his light hair was close-cropped; instead of wearing a mustache and goatee, he was clean-shaven. But there was little doubt but that the deep-set blue eyes, the hawklike nose and the height were the same as Wild Jack's. And the guns were either his—or exact duplicates.

"All right, gents," said the marshal. "Looks like you come close to home this time. But I paid my debt to the law. For the past two years the town's been kept peaceful without any killing. And—you notice that there ain't any grave-markers in boothill with Wild Jack's initials on 'em."

The mayor said, "That's all true, Bill—uh, Jack. But sooner or later some of the gents you knew when you was outside the law will mosey in. Or some gun-smart kid will want to try out your trigger-swift. Nope, it won't work. We're askin' you to turn in your badge, an' hang up your guns. Or ride out by sun-up tomorrow. Here's a check to cover your unexpired term."

The marshal took off his badge. Then he looked at his guns. "I had these a mighty long time, gents," he said slowly. "They're my life-insurance. But I'll promise I won't use 'em, unless you call on me. An' sun-up's damn early for a lazy gent like me to do my ridin'."

Thus it was, that a month later, the ex-marshal bought a partnership in the Red Dog Saloon—Farney and Kelly, Props.

A man's reputation dies hard. Drifting cowboys spread the word that Wild Jack Kelly had quit the gun-trails and had become respectable. So it was not surprising when three dusty, slouched riders swung from their saddles one night as the saloon was about to close, and later were seen to go into the rear office, accompanied by the ex-marshal.

Kelly grinned when Redleg George put forth his proposition about a raid on the town bank. Yeah, he admitted that sometimes he did hunger for the thrill of snarling guns, the long, hard rides and the excitement of outwitting a law-posse. And, he also admitted that the money would come in handy right then. So it was arranged. In two days they'd make their play for a South America stake. Jack Kelly would make his last ride down the dark and twisted trails.

Next morning, Kelly went into the bank, and came out lugging a fat black bag. He returned with it to the saloon, slapped it on the bar and transferred it to the safe, laughingly remarking that he never did put too much faith in

other fellers' banks—he had his own. Redleg George and the two men with him caught the humor of this pleasantry at once. And it also set them to thinking. . . .

It had been no secret that Kelly had made a nice bit of money, one way or another, over the years. He liked money, too, and seldom wanted to risk his roll over the green-topped tables. But was his own bank that antiquated iron safe in the saloon . . .? Slowly Redleg George and the other two drifted out, their eyes thoughtful. . . .

Late that night, Kelly got a rig, threw a shovel in the box along with another empty satchel and a few other things. And three sets of greedy eyes watched him from the shadows.

A few minutes later, he drove out of town. He hitched the horse, then, his arms loaded, made his way to boothill. There he set to work with his shovel.

After perhaps half an hour, he was aware of muffled hoofbeats along the road. Smiling to himself, he leaned over the hole, beside which fresh-dug earth was piled. Then he looked up as three slouched, shadowed shapes appeared.

Kelly's hands lifted the guns from their holsters. "All right, boys," he called. "You're just in time. This is my bank—after a fashion. Lift yore hands—slow."

And when the three renegades obeyed, Kelly said, "You, Redleg, make a light—An' do it damn easy. Then, take a look at these three headboards. You've double-crossed your last man!"

Redleg George's match flickered, then with a hoarse curse he flung himself sideways, the gun which he'd drawn streaking fire at Kelly. But Kelly, it seemed, wasn't there. Gunflame lashed out from the edge of the hole, and Redleg was flung backward by a bullet from Wild Jack's gun. In doing that, he knocked the scar-faced partner off balance, and the two faded as if the earth had swallowed them. The third fired once, and a bullet tore into Kelly's left ear, but it was the last shot he ever fired. . . .

And after that, half a dozen townsmen came up and took charge of the dead and wounded.

"Damn it," said the mayor. "I knew there'd be trouble if you stuck around long enough. You got a batch of explainin' to do if you don't want to leave town sudden. . . ."

Jack laughed as they fixed up his bullet-torn ear. "To begin with," he said, "I ain't Wild Jack Kelly. But likely I'm the only man who knows what became of him. Jack Kelly, gents, died from pneumonia, with his boots off, at my shack on the Arrowhead. I'm Bill Henry, gents, like I told you, but my last name's Kelly, too—Jack's kid brother. I always liked Jack, so I sorta took it as a compliment when you thought I was him. He told me, as he died, that Redleg George and these other two ran out on him one night when he was bad wounded an' left him for a crooked lawman, an' a prison term. When these three came back to plan that bank-robbery, they thought he didn't know they'd run out on him. Nor did Jack ever tell anybody but me about who they was.

"In boothill you'll find three shallow graves, complete with headboards. Underneath is the brand, JK. Bein' in the shadows, the boys sorta missed their footing on these two graves, which helped some. Because I ain't the gunman Jack was—an' I figgered I had to sort of even the odds if I was to pay Jack's debt. That's about all, gents."

"No it ain't—not by a damn sight," the mayor rumbled. "We made you one proposition. Now we're makin' another. This is it: You either take this badge an' use your—Jack's—guns when, as, an' if you see fit—or leave town tomorrow at sun-up."

Bill Henry Kelly's grin widened. "Sun-up's a heap too early for me, Mister Mayor," he said. "So, like before, I'm takin' you up."

—THE MAVERICK

HELL SERVED HOT FOR BULLWHIP BILL!

Smashing "Bullwhip Bill" McCrackin Novel

By TOM ROAN

McCrackin's long whip shot out, writhing like a snake about the man's neck. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Into the Devil's Stables

THERE was trouble afloat in Windy Butte, and Old Bullwhip Bill McCrackin could sense it in the warm mid-morning air when he rode up the bald hill and headed toward the

All Bullwhip Bill McCrackin wanted in Windy Butte was grain for his horse and grub. But when they served him a hot-lead dinner, it called for instant payment—in the deadly snarling lash of his famous black-snake whip!

end of the sun-baked and false-fronted Main Street.

No horses stood at the hitchracks up and down the planked sidewalks. Not a man—not even a dog—was in sight. Save for a thin trail of smoke coming from the cupola of the soot-blackened blacksmith shop at the foot of the street, Windy Butte looked like a ghost town. Then McCrackin noticed that almost every door up and down the street was closed. Curtains were either drawn over windows or their stout wooden shutters had been swung together. Some of them had their iron bars bolting them.

"A town all set an' waitin' for the boogers!" grunted McCrackin, pulling his tall white horse, Gabriel's Trumpet, to a halt in front of the bank. He sat there with his short, barrel-shaped body tilted forward in his saddle while his reddish-brown eyes studied the town. "Just waitin', I reckon, for the guns to go off an' the undertaker to come 'round passin' the hat." He nodded sourly. "I've seen too many of 'em like this."

He swung his horse to the left with a feeling that the danger was growing around him. At least, the public stables were open—mainly, he guessed, because there were no doors to close over the long, cool-shadowed hallway. Pulling rein inside, he swung swiftly out of his saddle when a warning voice to the left came to him through a crack in the harness room door.

"Git that white hoss in the clear, fella!" came the whisper. "If yo've got a dollar, yuh can put yore hoss in that last stall, then poke me the dollar through this crack. If yuh ain't got no dollar, move on. But dollar or no dollar, if yo're one what runs easy, yo'd better leave the saddle on 'im. Hell's a-gointa pop, an' it ain't a-gointa be long comin'."

Into the stall, McCrackin slipped off the horse's bridle and hung it on the saddle horn. There was hay in the rack above the feed box, and oats in the box. Satisfied that Gabriel's Trumpet was taken care of for the moment, he moved back to the door to the harness room.

"Here's yore money, fella!" He thrust a silver dollar through the crack. "Yuh come high, but yuh feed well. What's wrong with Windy Butte? Ever'body got the belly-ache, or just takin' their forenoon nap?"

McCrackin looked through the crack and caught a glimpse of a man of fifty, a fat, bald-headed fellow whose sickly-pale face might have belonged to somebody locked up in a room filled with ghosts.

"It's a heap sight wuss than a little thing like that. Yo'd better get in that stable with yore hoss an' take cover under the manger."

"I'd like to be sociable for just now," growled McCrackin. "Open the door. Hell, I ain't goin' to bite yuh!"

"No, I reckon not," drawled the stableman, "but—but yo're totin' a big pair of white-handled sixguns in yore belts an' I saw a Winchester on yore saddle. That brands yuh either as a Drum Head rider or a East Montana sheepman. Either one's poison these days, an' I ain't wantin' the Samuel P. McHuffy Stables shot all to hell. I'm for peace."

"That's me all over," grinned McCrackin. "I'm a natural-born sky-pilot, sorter backed down on my workin's a little. I ain't no Drum Head man, an' I ain't no sheep critter. If yo'll open the door I'll provide us with a pint."

"Whiskey?"

"Whiskey!" nodded McCrackin. "Real skull-bust, run-off from a tin can an' bottled in the bushes. Guaranteed to knock yuh down in five rods, an'—"

The door was hastily flung open. "Say no more, brother! I been a dyin' all mornin' for a few drinks an' too scared—Look out! She—she's comin'!"

McCRACKIN got inside just in time to keep the door from slamming in his face. A shot had sounded down the street. As if it was the one thing needed to arouse all Windy Butte, there was an outburst of wild yells. McCrackin thrust a bottle in the stableman's hand, and pushed past him to a window.

Windy Butte had sprung into action. Men had suddenly appeared on roofs of houses across the street. Rifle barrels and shotguns glinted in the sunlight. A scattered burst of shots rolled over the town. Everybody seemed to be blazing away at some unseen enemy approaching down the street.

"Somethin's shore makin' 'em tear up the sod!" McCrackin started to turn away from the window. "I—"

A bullet, smashing through a pane of glass above his head, cut him off.

"It's the Banner Boys!" gasped the stableman, throwing himself face-down on the floor with the bottle still clutched in a paw. "They don't like me none too well, anyhow. Excuse me. Here's yore bottle, falla. I drunk a mite more'n I shoulda."

"Finish it!" ordered McCrackin, waving the bottle aside and quickly sitting on the floor as a second bullet scattered the flying glass in all directions. "Maybe after that yuh can tell me who an' what started the war."

"She—she didn't need no startin'!" gasped the stableman, choking down the last drop of the whiskey. "Lis'en to that! Hear 'em acomin'? Eight thousan' in this batch, they say. Maybe more. Yo'll soon be ahearin' the guns goin' off in the windows of the jail-house when Fate Goode an' his deppities start backin' the sheep crowd's play. He's for 'em, tooth an' nail, Fate is."

"It's nice for yuh to tell me all about it," scowled McCrackin, turning and crawling back to the window. "With all yore gaggin' an' sputterin' like an old boar in a swill trough, I'm sorter gettin' the half-way notion that somebody's mad 'bout somethin'."

He stole a glance down the street. Riders filled passageways between buildings on the western side of the street. Rifles and shotguns were gashing wicked spurts of flame. Just now everybody seemed to be fighting everybody else, and there was no sense to it.

McCrackin started to turn away from the window as another bullet smashed through so close to him he could feel the wind of it against his cheek.

"I don't like that!" he roared, snatching a .45 from its holster and suddenly opening fire at a man on the roof of a harness store across. The man went backward abruptly. "When I ain't in a fight I wanta be left alone! I—"

"Yuh don't start fightin' back in my place!" bawled the stableman. "I told yuh I didn't want yuh in here! I—"

"Shut up an' take cover!" bellowed McCrackin as a fresh hail of bullets came through the window. "A mob over there is jumpin' us, yuh fat fool, an' I can't see where I've done anything anybody else wouldn't do!"

SHEEP filled the street. They kept coming, spreading out until they covered the sidewalks. Bullwhip Bill McCrackin thought he had never seen the like of them before. The stableman had said something about eight thousand of them, but it looked more like eighty thousand.

For an hour, as shots raked the window of the harness room, Mr. Samuel P. McHuffy, the stableman, cursed Bullwhip Bill, and prayed for him in a wheezy voice. He kept shifting about the floor, and finally took shelter against a pile of old saddles and harnesses in the corner.

"Yuh ain't got a bit of sense!" he started wheezing after a long-winded prayer. "Quit shootin' back at that roof! They'll hang yuh for it 'fore they're done."

A stranger ain't got no chance in this town, fella. They may even wanta hang *me,* though ever'body knows I don't keep no gun. The best thing for yuh is to get yore hoss an' hammer out the back way while the sheep's got ever'body busy. Maybe I can save my own neck then, 'cause ever'body musta saw yuh turn in here on that big tombstone hoss.

The man's incessant pleading and sudden hails of buckshot from the roof across the street helped decide it. After all, Windy Butte held nothing of real importance to McCrackin. He was heading south, and he had heard some talk of a cow and sheep war in the rich rangelands of the Drum Head Mountains and high valleys surrounding the town. Men at sheep and cattle camps where he had stopped to spend a night or get a meal had been reluctant to discuss it.

"Please go, fella!" the stableman begged. It looked like Samuel P. McHuffy was going to break down in a fit of weeping. "Gawd knows yuh ain't doin' me nothin' but harm. Yore hoss has had time to eat. Here, I'll even give yuh yore dollar back, if you'll only git out!"

"Keep it!" ordered McCrackin, waving the hand away. "I pay my own way, Mr. McHuffy."

Once started, he moved quickly to the door. When he stepped out into the hallway he was in sight of the men on the roof across the street. Here was his chance now to take the responsibility off McHuffy's shoulders for the shooting from the window.

A black-bearded man on the roof yelled and stood up with a shotgun. But McCrackin was firing before the man could jerk the butt of his weapon to his shoulder. The black-bearded man reeled backward, the shotgun exploding its double charge in the air. The man fell, clawing at his chest, blood fluttering through his fingers just as two other gunmen appeared.

McCrackin sent bullets whistling over their heads, and then he was turning to run. A rifle bullet and a hail of buckshot swept down the hall, but McCrackin was keeping close to the wall. He made it to the stall where he had left Gabriel's Trumpet, and soon had the bridle on the horse.

But leaving the stables was not as simple as it seemed. Yelling voices came from the rear of the roof above his head. That meant the men on the roof of the harness store had shouted a warning to the men on top of the stables. And when a man darted out the back door, shots would blast him down from behind. Leaving the stables was no better than sheer suicide.

McCrackin did the only thing he could. He stepped backward out the door with a .45 roaring shots upward from either hand. The men above him, taken by surprise, fell back, stampeding to safety at the front end.

That gave McCrackin his chance. He was into his saddle like a bullet, and both spurs drove home. Gabriel's Trumpet left the stables like a white rocket. McCrackin whirled him close to the rear of the buildings, the guns in his hands roaring. A bullet slapped a hole through the crown of his old hat. A hail of buckshot whistled around him. Another slug slapped into the cantle of his saddle like a ringing gong.

But he had a good start on them, and he swung around the corner of a warehouse with Gabriel's Trumpet going so fast the toe of his left boot scraped the ground.

Rifle bullets and buckshot crashed like forty hammers ringing on clear-steel anvils. It looked as if the whole town had forgotten the infernal sheep and were concentrating their fire on the stranger who had dared to take a hand in their fight.

McCrackin looked back. He saw the

old jail at the head of the street. Seven men with badges on their chests were pouring out the side windows, running to horses. Mounted, they whirled, tearing up a cloud of dust, and were suddenly riding like demons on the hot trail Gabriel's Trumpet was making for them down the side of the butte.

"Kicked myself over a hornet's nest, shore!" grinned McCrackin, shaking out the flying horse's reins. "It's up an' go from yonder now, Gabriel!"

CHAPTER TWO

Death-Trap!

THE seven men behind were not sparing their horses. McCrackin heard a bullet whistle overhead as he cleared the rim of the butte, striking the shelter of a jackpine thicket. Now he started curving northward, back-tracking the trail he had followed earlier in the morning.

Yells came to him before he had gone four hundred yards. The posse was swinging out of the pines. It took but small guess-work to know that the man in the lead was Windy Butte's new sheriff.

McCrackin remembered hearing something about him at a sheep camp—something about the fellow filling the boots of the town's real sheriff who had mysteriously disappeared. Some had said the man had been killed. Others had it that he had caught himself a set of very cold feet and had grasped the opportunity of a dark night to place Windy Butte and his enemies behind him.

The man at the head of the posse was tall and lank, a dark-faced fellow in fancy mail-order clothes, topped by a fifty-dollar white hat. Yes, that would be Fate Goode. The big, red-bearded man just behind him would be Bush Yawberry, chief deputy, and a man—if reports were true—whom Big Sam Horn, the missing sheriff, would not have had within fifty yards of his jail, unless it was with a pair of handcuffs on his wrists.

"An' me, I walk right in on trouble!" McCrackin kept growling, glancing back over his shoulder. "If there's a smell of it in forty miles, it lands on me. All I wanted was a good feedin' for a hoss, an' about a yard of beefsteak an' a gallon of coffee for myself. Instead, I catch myself only a dose of hemp tea if they catch up. That's the McCrackin in me!"

Rough country was ahead, the hills and high mountains of the Drum Heads

BIG BOY TAKES A TIP
BOB: Say, fellow, are you taking Ex-Lax? Thought that was for women and kids.
JIM: Wrong, Big Boy! I've been taking Ex-Lax for years. It fixes me up fine!
BOB: Oh yeah! Well, I'm pretty husky ... I need a laxative with a wallop.
JIM: Don't kid yourself! Ex-Lax tastes good, but it's plenty effective!
LATER
BOB: Thanks for the tip, pal! I tried Ex-Lax and it's great stuff!
JIM: What did I tell you! It's the only laxative we ever use in our family.
The action of Ex-Lax is thorough, yet gentle! No shock. No strain. No weakening after-effects. Just an easy, comfortable bowel movement that brings blessed relief. Try Ex-Lax next time you need a laxative. It's good for every member of the family.
10¢ and 25¢
EX-LAX
THE CHOCOLATED LAXATIVE

reared against the sky. Once into them there would be mile-deep canyons and dark gorges, and McCrackin knew he could ride down any posse or find a place to take shelter and stand them off with his old Winchester until the cows came home. Later, with the law cleared from his heels, he could make a wide detour and continue on his way to southward.

He raked Gabriel's Trumpet a little harder with his rusty old rowels when a burst of shots sounded behind him and whistling bullets wailed overhead and from either side.

The mouths of two gorges loomed ahead, one to the right, the other slightly to the left. Each gorge mouth was like a crack in a great shoulder of the rock-rimmed mountain ahead. Either one offered a place for a man to head in and leave the posse following right after him, without a chance to get above him.

A WILDER burst of shots punctuated by yells arose behind him. Men riding as rapidly as those would not have a chance of hitting anything. But there was a reason for it, and McCrackin soon saw it coming into action ahead of him.

Five men on sweat-lathered horses were coming out of the mouth of the left-hand gorge and a thousand yards ahead. The yelling and shooting behind him now told him that Fate Goode and his deputies knew the men. There was an answering yell from them, and McCrackin saw a flash of rifle barrels in the sunlight as the oncoming five riders swung up their weapons.

McCrackin reached down and pulled his own old Winchester up. There was going to be hell to pay right here and now.

He was still riding almost straight toward the mouth of the right-hand gorge. He was making it a point to impress that on the men ahead. They were stringing out into a racing line, heading to catch him and Gabriel's Trumpet between their own hot blasting guns and those of the posse behind.

A ravine showed ahead. Desperately, McCrackin swerved into it. Now, for a little while, he was out of sight of both the strings of riders, and his chance came at a branch of the ravine. He swung abruptly to his left, pressing hard on his rowels and leaning low over his saddle.

He was within two hundred yards of the mouth of the gorge before either the possemen or the men ahead were aware of his trick. Yells and a scream of bullets overhead told him that his plan was dicovered, and it was hell-for-leather from that moment on. The men now off to his right pulled up their horses and flung themselves out of their saddles to open a more steady fire on him.

A bullet struck his saddle horn. Another ripped through his old war-bag. They were all around him after that. Suddenly Gabriel's Trumpet stumbled, and McCrackin swore. For a moment he thought the horse had been shot, but it had been a flying stone the size of his fist kicked under the horse's feet by a low bullet. Gabriel's Trumpet soon recovered, though he was still traveling with a limp.

And now the gorge mouth. Slivers of rock flew above him to the right and left as the hail of bullets increased. Even the posse had halted, every man throwing himself out of his saddle and dropping to one knee to open fire. But they were too late.

Once around a bend, McCrackin was desperately looking for a place to halt and make it a fight. For no man in all his life—and no crowd of men—had ever called on him for a fight and failed to get it. He wanted some place here in the rocks where Gabriel's Trumpet would be in the clear, and then they would catch it, law or no law. He'd be damned if he'd be shot or hanged merely to make a

political record for any tin-horn law-squirt!

It was an ideal place, but McCrackin thought he heard something ahead of him. He kept on for another hundred and fifty yards, and found what looked like something better. He swung Gabriel's Trumpet into it, and backed him in the clear. It was then that he realized that the gorge he had seen off to the right made a curve back through the wall of the mountain and joined the gorge he was in!

He heard the slap and dash of pounding hoofs on shale even as he was slipping out of his saddle, and knew that he had jockeyed himself into a death-trap.

CHAPTER THREE

Buffalo Jack Takes Cards

THE blood was not long coming, but it was spilled from a wholly unexpected source. McCrackin had just had time enough to settle himself. At least he had picked a second good spot, completely screened by boulders and dense little pines, banked in an almost solid wall against the towering side of the gorge.

He gave little thought to his horse, once the animal was safely sheltered behind rocks. Gabriel's Trumpet had been through too many fights to give his master away by the foolish habit of nickering. Turning back to a crack between two tall rocks with his Winchester ready, McCrackin waited for the battle to begin.

A louder pounding of hoofs in rocks suddenly brought into view the five riders who had tried to cut him off from the base of the mountain. They popped up seventy yards to McCrackin's left, appearing like leaping frogs, one behind the other, their rifles ready. Right after that noise came another to McCrackin's right —the sheriff and his six men came on, hell-bent into the gorge.

McCrackin looked at the leading horseman to his left who had suddenly pulled rein with the others jamming up behind. He was a burly, black-bearded fellow, his rifle up and ready, his bay's reins gripped in his teeth, and black eyes probing the gorge. The others were just as alert, shifty-eyed, tight-lipped men who would shoot first and ask questions afterward.

A wild hope had come to McCrackin that both groups of riders would go on, giving him a chance to swing back and make his escape when they were out of sight around a bend. But there was no such luck.

A strange, deafening, thundering roar of a shot suddenly rolled through the warm sunlight. It was a sound that might have come from some naval gun, a bursting, *bal-l-loom*-ing *boom!* rocking from wall to wall and up and down the gorge in a colliding sea of waves and billows, themselves almost enough to knock a man down.

A hoarse cry of alarm came from some of the men to McCrackin's left. The burly black-bearded leader stiffened in his saddle. McCrackin's mouth flew open from shock and surprise. For an instant he could not believe his eyes.

The black-beard was there in his saddle, rifle still in his hands. His reins had dropped, the ragged ends spilling from the place that had been his mouth. There was no mouth there now. It had disappeared, along with half the black-bearded face, now only a spilling red mass. It had been torn away by an enormous charge of buckshot, horseshoe nails, and cut slugs of lead, fired from a pile of rocks on the western rim of the gorge.

There was scarcely time for the others to fall back before the second deafening explosion came lurching down through the sunlight. As the roar came, the dead black-bearded man was tumbling out of

his saddle, his bay snorting and plunging forward.

It was pandemonium of the damned then, with cries and yells of terror—and one man suddenly parting company with his right arm that separated from his shoulder and dropped to the ground—and men flung back, fleeing with blood appearing from somewhere on each rider's chest, stomach or face.

Fate Goode and his little mob had just appeared. McCrackin was in the act of swinging around the muzzle of his Winchester to open fire on them and take them by surprise. But the look on the handsome Sheriff Fate Goode's face halted him. Goode's features had suddenly become a mask of terror, eyes bulging in their sockets. Then the man was whirling his horse. His rifle slipped out of his hands, falling with a clatter against the rocks. He found his voice long enough to yell one word:

"Scatter!"

That was the start of a second panic-stricken riot. Goode waited for no one. Handsome Mr. Fate Goode was all thought and action for only himself! His horse knocked the mounts of his deputies to the right and left, parting an opening in the jammed mob like a run-away wagon plowing its tongue through a fence. A bold man of the law in the lead at the beginning, he was a shrieking maniac now, roweling and slashing with spurs and Spanish against his sweat-dripping horse.

They were gone before a man could take off his hat and scratch his head. McCrackin stood there, listening until the wild beat of hoofs and the terrified yells died to faint whispers. He turned then, looking upward, wondering who in the blazes had brought a cannon in the game where the odds against him had been twelve to one.

An answer to his puzzled scowl was not long coming.

A HANDFUL of gravel rattled down the face of the rocks above him. There was a slight wait, and then a lean, gray-bearded face on a long old-terrapin neck peered down from the rim of the gorge. A voice followed. It was so thin and quarrelsome it might have come from some ghost that had appeared on the rim.

"Are yuh all right, fella? I saw 'em atter yuh. Jes couldn't keep my paws outa it. Them five I started on killed a friend of mine this mornin' jes 'fore daylight."

"An' who," demanded McCrackin, looking upward owlishly, "might you be, pardner? Yuh shore plucked this critter an' his hoss out of a mighty bad hole."

"It was pleasure!" cackled back the old man on the rim. "But cut trail while yuh can, stranger, Don't waste time standin' an' jowerin'. They'll be back, Goode an' his crowd will, with a whole danged army. Ride on up the gorge, an' swing up the draw to yore left when yuh pass the second bend. As to who I am, I reckon it could wait, but if it'll quiet yore curiosity a mite, some folks call me Buffalo Jack."

LOWERING his Winchester's hammer and mounting Gabriel's Trumpet, McCrackin rode on. He passed the dead men, lying on the edge of the shale that floored the branch of the gorge. A few minutes later he came upon the dead man's bay.

The horse had galloped on, the shot-torn ends of his reins dragging. With a snort the horse started to gallop away, and the twenty-foot blacksnake whip McCrackin always carried on his saddle now came into use.

Always a wizard with that whip, McCrackin took it across his lap. He rode on quietly, waiting until he was within whip-length of the bay, and the whip shot out. The end of it wrapped itself around the bay's reins, pulling the horse

to a halt and holding him until McCrackin could ride up.

"Just goin' to do yuh a favor, hoss," he half-grinned, reaching down and cutting the latigo of the animal's saddle, then slipping off the bay's bridle. "Go yore way in peace!"

The horse galloped away, the saddle and its blanket sliding from his back and bouncing on the ground. A short time later McCrackin was turning the second bend in the gorge, swinging up a long slope. He reached the rim, and sat there, staring at a man and a horse moving toward him from a thicket of low pines.

"Shades of Job's coffin!" he whispered under his breath. "Now I *know* I'm seein' things, Gabriel!"

He kept staring, too amazed to speak. One glance at the oncoming man's face was enough to tell him that it was the same face he had seen peering down at him from the rim. The man was walking, leading a scare-crow black horse behind him—a rack of bones that looked as tall as a covered wagon.

The man himself was tall, and so lean his hands were like talons. His face might have been all bone, covered with a sun-dried and wrinkled skin mottled with a scrawny white beard. A ragged gray hat sat on the back of his head with unkempt tails of long white hair showing beneath it.

A wicked knife hung in a sheath at his belt. In the crook of a bony left arm was a long-barreled muzzle-loader rifle with a slender stock and a butt covered with silver. Hanging to either side of an Indian saddle was a pair of old-time cap-an'-ball revolvers. And then, on the right side of the saddle was the gun of all guns. It was a muzzle-loader shotgun, and the bore of each of its long, shining old barrels looked large enough to chamber balls the diameter of silver dollars.

"Hi-yi!" The man bobbed his head in a nod, and came to a halt three yards away with a pair of green-gander eyes looking McCrackin up and down. "I jes took a look down the country from a high pile of rocks back there. Purty Mr. Fate Goode met a gang comin' off Windy Butte. I reckon they won't be long takin' up yore trail agin. What got yuh out on a limb with 'em, so to speak? Or is it jes none of my business, now that yo're up an' able to ramble agin?"

"When a man helps me outa a jam, I figger it shore is his business to know what it's all about," frowned McCrackin.

He told the old man what had happened in the town. He was short, right to the point with it.

"Yo're the kind who'd fight back, yeah!" The man who called himself Buffalo Jack nodded and risked the hint of a toothless grin. "I know a man when I see one!" He stepped back, caught his rack-a-bone horse by the mane with his left hand, and made a flat-footed jump that carried him into his saddle. "Let's ride. It ain't safe here. Yuh mayn't know it jes' now, but yo've cut yoreself off a right nice chunk of one of the comin'est sheep an' cow wars yo've ever heard of—an' that ain't no lie!"

McCRACKIN learned a lot about him, and many things more about Drum Head Range, before they had gone the first five miles. The man was well past ninety, an old-timer, former buffalo hunter, gold miner, trapper, trader, Indian scout and a steamboat man on the upper Missouri. For thirty years he had been hunting wolves. He knew the Drum Heads as well as any man could.

"Which ain't knowin' all of 'em by a long shot, McCrackin," he was finally admitting. "No man knows 'em all, Indian ner white. They're wild an' dark in spots. There ain't a day hardly passes but what I'm findin' somethin' new.

"But this war now," he went on. "She ain't what she's cracked up to be. 'Tain't

jes' sheep an' cows, though there's a big sheep company movin' in, lock an' stock, an' they'll get the gravy. Heap like politics—this 'un promises that 'un an' that 'un promises this 'un. Like whole countries goin' to war an' draggin' in their neighbors. It's a grab-off for the sheep folks, but there's some cowmen in here what'll be let stick on an' have more range handed to 'em. They'll keep it 'til the sheep company's got a strangle-holt, an' then they'll be kicked out."

"It's old story to me, Jack," agreed McCrackin. "But what about Sheriff Sam Horn I've heard talk of? Was he killed or did he take a sneak-out ride, like some say?"

"Sam?" The old man fired him a mean glance. "Big Sam never snuk out on nothin'. He's a young fella, kinda handsome, easy-goin' an' hard as nails if he had to be. Sam was shot, I'm thinkin'. He was about to marry a gal I know, one purty as a mink. It was her daddy that was killed at daylight. That's the main reason I waded in on yore show with Avalanche."

He patted the big, hand-fashioned walnut butt of the enormous shotgun. "Made 'er myself, this she-cannon. Wanted somethin' bigger'n I could buy. Eight-gauge was the biggest, so I made this 'un a six. Have to butt it agin somethin' to shoot it. She'll knock a hoss down.

"I used it, an' three more just like it, years ago at a tradin' post I had on the Yellowstone. Indians wouldn't let me alone, even when I was married to eight of their best-lookin' squaws at the time. They tried to take the post only twice atter I made the Avalanches. Their bones are still scattered up an' down the river."

"Yuh carry that thing all the time?" McCrackin glowered at the gun. "Pack it 'round on a hoss?"

"Hell-a-humpin', no!" grinned the old man. "I carry it jes on special jobs: I ain't shot it in seven years til' today. Friend of mine had been keepin' it hangin' over his door. We're goin' there now. It was Jim North what was killed, yuh see, an' his Jenny what aimed to marry Big Sam. Big Sam's fade-out weeks ago sorter busted her an' Jim up. Left 'em addled."

They were swinging up a long, winding ridge. They had seen no more of Fate Goode and his crowd.

McCrackin felt that the sheriff had been given the slip back there in the gorge when he turned out of it. A posse trying to follow them now would have about as much chance of overtaking them as they would have of sprouting wings. Even on the knife-narrow ridgeback the going was dangerous. At times the trail was broken and fallen away at either hand, with the rocks barely broad enough for the horses to find footing.

Turning out at last on a rocky spur overlooking a high-walled valley slashed with a brawling creek a hundred and fifty yards below, the sudden reports of shots came to them. They pulled rein quickly. McCrackin turned his head, following Buffalo Jack's gaze, and then saw a puff of smoke in the distance.

"Fightin' 'er out in the timber!" grunted the old man. "Must be the Ellison an' Chumley folks catching it. Look!" He lifted a long, skinny claw of a hand to point. "See 'em?"

McCrackin saw it all then. Four heavy wagons covered with canvas tops came swaying out of a dense grove of cottonwoods. Even from the distance it could be seen that women were driving the teams. Riders were galloping around the wagons, desperately trying to protect them against a rolling gunfire coming from men hiding below the rocks that formed the creek bank on the eastern side of the stream. McCrackin saw a man reel backward in his saddle, then rock forward to clutch his horse's mane.

"That was Joe Chumley," muttered

Buffalo Jack as if talking to himself. "Good man, hard worker, bothered nobody. Let's put our hosses in the clear, McCrackin. That's an Ellison wagon in the lead, an' somebody's musta seen me up here. They're headin' this way."

HE WAS right about it. An angular woman and a tall youth on the front seat of the leading wagon were whipping up their horses, heading straight for the foot of the cliffs. The other wagons were following with the mounted riders still swirling around them and blazing away at their attackers along the creek.

With the horses in the clear, McCrackin watched Buffalo Jack load his enormous old shotgun. From a big cow horn covered with silver at one end and stoppered with a cork from a whiskey bottle, the man poured two handfuls of black powder into each barrel.

He rammed down wads of old newspaper, tamped them firmly in place with the blunt-ended ramrod, then poured in the damndest conglomeration of charges McCrackin had ever seen. There were buckshot, horseshoe nails, cut slugs of lead, and a twenty-penny nail in each barrel. The old man secured the charges with two more wads of paper, and then slipped brass caps over the firing tubes.

"Now we're ready," he chuckled, easing down the hammers. "I never pack 'er loaded. Too dangerous, tricky as the triggers are."

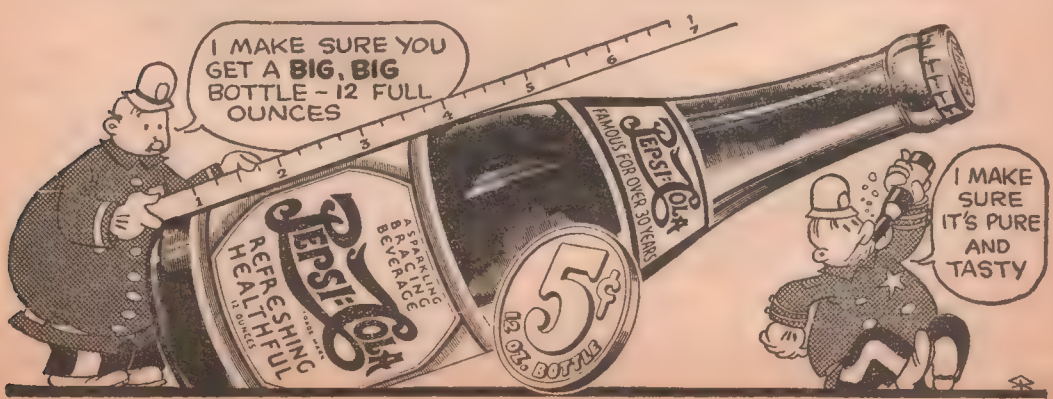
McCrackin was ready with his Winchester. He was with a man who really loved to fight, and for once he was seeing himself take orders.

The wagons came on. McCrackin and Buffalo Jack were lying on the rim. The old man had found a place where he could brace the butt of his gun. They waited, watching the wagons.

Now riders, breaking cover from the creek, came in a riot—eleven men yelling like Indians and waving their rifles over their heads. McCrackin found the chest of the last man over the sights of his Winchester, but he was holding his fire, waiting for Buffalo Jack to open up and mow down the leaders.

A minute later murder was pouring down from the rim. The double roar of Buffalo Jack's old gun was enough to leave a man's ears ringing for hours. The black-powder smoke boiled out from the muzzles of the old gun, a stifling black cloud on the rim that caused McCrackin to miss his second shot. For the next half-minute McCrackin could not see a thing. His ringing ears shut out the sounds below. He fell back coughing and gasping, trying to get his breath in the acrid cloud filling the air.

When the smoke lifted he saw that the old home-made shotgun had been equal to a dozen rifles. Five men who had been



galloping along within arm's length of each other for a few moments were now reeling in their saddles and turning back. Other men had swarmed around them.

"Quickest kickin' of a crowd I ever saw," coughed McCrackin, unable to get the confounded bite of the powdersmoke away. "That cannon of yores does the work."

"We ain't licked 'em yet, McCrackin!" Buffalo Jack had produced an old brass telescope from somewhere inside his buckskins. "They've licked us complete an' proper for right now. Take a look!" He thrust the battered telescope into McCrackin's hands. "Straight on up the crick, jes to the left of that knoll what looks like a sway-backed hoss. See?"

"Yeah, I see," nodded McCrackin after a long minute of squinting through the telescope. "There's two more of the party what didn't take no han' in the fight. What's that one got pulled up crost his saddle in front of 'im? Looks like a bundle."

"But it ain't!" Buffalo Jack quickly reached for the telescope. "That's a gal, McCrackin! A purty gal, the one Big Sam Horn was gonna marry. Them hellers are takin' Jenny off with 'em. McCrackin!" He bounced to his feet like an ancient acrobat. "The ridin' an' the fightin's jes started for us!"

CHAPTER FOUR

A Pair of Cold Feet!

WITH the wagons having gone on, and the valley being rapidly cleared of its killers, they turned back to their horses. Buffalo Jack loaded his old Avalanche, placing a bent green twig under the awkward looking hammers to ease their weight from the firing caps.

"She's tricky 'cause her hammer springs are jes' too stout," he explained. "Half-cockin' 'er don't do no good. The triggers'll catch, but they're filed so fine they won't hold. Any little jar'll set her off, an' it's jes' too wet to plow then."

McCrackin kept out of the way of the thing. He waited for the old man to mount, and then followed him. Buffalo Jack led the way on a narrow trail that twisted its dangerous way down to the valley.

They swung away from each other, with McCrackin crossing the creek to follow one side of it while Buffalo Jack kept to the other. They rode rapidly but cautiously. McCrackin scanned every pile of rocks and cluster of low trees ahead of him. A yell finally took him back across the creek to a neat little two-room log house sitting on a rise above a big spring and densely surrounded by rocks and trees. Buffalo Jack was already dismounted at the door.

"Yep, they've done their do!" exclaimed the old man, stepping through the open doorway and looking around with McCrackin at his heels. "Jenny, I reckon, tried to put up a fight."

McCrackin looked at the body of a tall, gray-haired man lying on a table in the center of the room. That would be the remains of Jim North, lying there with the sheet that had covered him torn off his body and trampled on the floor. The rest of the little house was upset, chairs turned over, a sheet-iron stove kicked down in the corner, and the panes in the small windows gouged out as if from the barrels of six-shooters.

"A Mystery Mountain gang's been here, shore!" snarled Buffalo Jack. "They allus mess things up, kickin' ever'thing apart an' smearin' it with blood if they've got anybody handy to bleed it out of!"

"An' who now," frowned McCrackin, "is this Mystery bunch? Dammit, I thought there was a war—"

" 'Twix' cow an' sheep, yeah," finished the old-timer. "An' it is—with all the cut-throat sides they can drag in to he'p

out. Mystery Mountain's up thataway, the roughest country a bald buzzard ever looked down on. Nobody what wants to live will even talk about the outlaws who hole-up there. A man takes his life in his hands when he goes near the place; an' that's where the cut-throat devils are takin' Jenny. They know they can kill anybody what tries to follow 'em. Do yuh try it with me?"

"Now look here," scowled McCrackin. "I don't even know anybody in these parts. I was only ridin' through, tryin' to mind my own business, an'—"

"Excuse me!" sneered Buffalo Jack, placing a long arm around his shoulder. "For once I misjedged a fella, McCrackin. Gettin' too darn old, maybe. I ain't in no war myself, but I can't see good folks murdered an' wimmin carted off. Yo're youngish, no more'n fifty, an' maybe ain't cut yore eye teeth yet. I ain't got no red stick candy to toll yuh along, but I'll straighten out that stove in the corner an' kindle a fire. Maybe yore 'ittle bitsy footsies need a 'ittle bitsy warmin'!"

"Why — why!" gasped McCrackin, struggling with surprise and sudden anger that seemed to choke him. "If yuh was forty years younger, I'd drop a gun-barrel crost yore brow an' fan yore eyebrows down! What I was goin' to say was that I'm dragged into this thing so fast I ain't had time to eat. I was gonna say we'd better gather up a batch of that canned meat an' truck in the corner, an' take it along with us. When do we shut the door an' start, yuh old tomahawk?"

SOMETHING told him that the whole thing was a plant, that the men who had carried the girl away had recognized old Buffalo Jack on the rim of the cliffs and wanted him to follow them.

The men ahead had made no attempt to hide their tracks. In places it was evident that they had taken pains to leave the hoofprints of their horses in the edges of sand bars along the creek where they might as well have taken to firmer ground. Then, at last, with the sun already dropped out of sight in the west, and dark hills looming at every hand, McCrackin saw bits of calico dropped here and there. One look at the torn scraps told him that it came from some part of a woman's dress.

"Old—so old it smells worse'n a pile of dead buzzards!" exploded McCrackin. "First tale Ma ever read to me in a schoolin' book was one just like it! Indians runnin' off with a woman, her a-droppin' yarn string! The gal, herself, ain't tearin' up her dress an' droppin' a little patch here an' there. The gang with 'er's doin' it. The thing's a come-along, Buffalo."

"Yuh catch on—in time!" grinned the old man. "Of course they want us to follow. More'n that, I'll bet Avalanche agin a pewter whistle there's some of the bunch watchin' us ever' step of the way. If yore footsies are beginnin' to chill again—"

"We'll hear no more 'bout that, skinny fella!" rasped McCrackin, cutting him off. "I've et two cans of beans an' a two-pound tin of beef. The salt's picklin' my innards, but the crick's still runnin'."

They had come to what looked like the end of everything. Cliffs surrounded them. At their foot was thick, choked brush and dwarfed pines. Above the brush and pines there was only jagged rocks. There was not a ledge wide enough for a goat to follow, but the calico was again in evidence.

McCrackin followed the bits with his eye. There were seven of them, leading straight into the brush, and with Buffalo Jack keeping back, his Avalanche ready, McCrackin moved on. The brush slashed around him. It looked as if he was riding straight up to a wall of bare rock, and then he saw a haze of light ahead. It came from a hole shaped like an upside-down V—a hole an army could pass

without a man discovering it. It was high enough for a man to ride through it on a tall horse, and with a low whistle for Buffalo Jack to bring up the rear, McCrackin moved on.

A tensed figure in his saddle, a man expecting gunfire at any moment, McCrackin was trying to watch everything. To his surprise, the opening in the rocks was no more than forty yards long. After a gradual bend purple light shone hazily ahead, and McCrackin was soon finding himself in another crater-like pit with brush-rimmed cliffs all around him.

Here the scraps of calico were in evidence again, leading to another hole, and another crater-like opening. There was nothing man-made about any of it, and it came to McCrackin that he was following an ancient underground river bed that had been diverted from its course for thousands of years by some great rock slide.

"Made to order for only us, an' the birds ahead leadin' us on," growled McCrackin. "Well—here goes nothin'!"

He led the way into another hole, then another, and at last came out just above the swirling waters of a swift little river tearing down through a rocky gorge with walls thrusting upward a thousand feet to the sky. The water was deep and blue except where the currents turned it to a churning and whistling white. Its banks were like glass, the rocks worn and polished by the years.

"Purgatory River!" exclaimed old Buffalo Jack, now coming up beside McCrackin and pulling his ghostly looking black to a halt. "I've seen it here an' yon in the back country. It stays mostly underground, bobbin' up here an' there."

McCRACKIN looked to the right. Here, now, were all the signs of a man-made trail. Rocks had been pulled down. Shale had been gouged out with picks. The trail was easily wide enough for a pack-train, and knowing they could do no worse than they had done, McCrackin swung Gabriel's Trumpet into it. Before he had gone eighty rods the trail was broadening and climbing higher in the face of a cliff above the raging waters below.

It was around a bend that the bridge came into view. Forty feet below it the river had become frightfully narrow, the water roaring with a steady thunder that was deafening. Anything that dropped into the stream here would be whisked away like a tumblewood in the teeth of a ninety-mile wind.

Something told McCrackin to turn back. Gabriel's trumpet had come to a halt, snorting and stamping. McCrackin studied the bridge. It looked all right. It was less than fifty feet long, made of three heavy cottonwood logs covered with rough planks marked by the passing of many iron-shod hoofs and spanning the river to a spur of rock on the other side of the stream where even a broader trail swung away to the right of it.

"What're yuh waitin' on?" growled Buffalo Jack, again coming up beside Gabriel's Trumpet. "If they'd been goin' to shoot us, they'd done it long ago!"

"Yeah, an' if yuh had the sense of a bull-bat," nodded McCrackin, "yo'd keep back, givin' me plenty of distance. Didn't yuh learn a damn thing durin' yore Army scoutin' days? Or have yuh forgot it?"

"This ain't no time to set an' jower," growled the old man, looking up and down the gorge with uneasy eyes. "Ride on. I'll wait until yo're in the clear on the other side."

McCrackin spurred Gabriel's Trumpet, and the horse tried to swing back. McCrackin did not like that at all. A horse sometimes knew more than a man; a horse could sometimes scent trouble from a clear sky, and Gabriel's Trumpet kept snorting, looking at the water

swirling below. He whirled back again, and finally—in sore disgust—McCrackin slipped out of his saddle and started leading the horse across the bridge.

He was in the middle of the bridge when the shots came. A volley roared up the river from the rocks on the rim of the gorge.

Buffalo Jack yelled something. Not a bullet was whistling around McCrackin, but they were slapping the rocks above the old hunter's head and smashing onto the trail just behind him. Suddenly nipped across the rump by one of the bullets, the skeleton black horse lunged forward, following Gabriel's Trumpet.

Both men and their horses were now on the bridge. The black seemed to be going crazy. He was lunging straight on for Gabriel's Trumpet as if going to attack him from behind with his forehoofs. McCrackin was trying to hurry, but his feet were suddenly flying out from under him, and his wide eyes were staring down into the mad waters below.

The bridge was like a long, narrow table heeling over on its right side with only one log holding it as a hinge. Horses and men were flung out into space, the horses bawling with terror, McCrackin and Buffalo Jack yelling with surprise. They struck the water.

There was a wild splash, an icy chill that drove through a man to the bone, and then—jammed between their fighting horses—they were coming up.

Yells and shouts of laughter sounded above them until the roar of the water drowned them out, sweeping the two helpless men and their horses on and on, through the thundering gorge.

CHAPTER FIVE

Bullwhip Bill—Starvation Gunman!

LONG-GONE cowboy now, it looked like. McCrackin was up, carried high in the water as if icy currents below were holding him on the surface. He had come up to the right of Gabriel's Trumpet, his Winchester gripped in his one hand. the left clawed into the horse's mane. He glanced back and saw Buffalo Jack.

The man still held his dangerous old Avalanche high above his head. Indian-fashion, he was gripping his horse by the root of the tail and swimming behind him.

McCrackin hung his rifle back on his saddle, and reached for his bullwhip. He was looking for anything where he could send the whip snaking out to wrap its end around it and allow him to pull himself and the desperate Gabriel's Trumpet to a way up from the water.

But there was no sign of anything for a man to reach for with a whip. The roaring of the water kept growing higher. The walls of the gorge were narrowing. A mountain showed ahead. It was like a wall itself, the smooth black rocks stretching skyward for more than a thousand feet.

Now it looked as if Purgatory River was going to have to come to an end, but a sudden turn in the gorge showed McCrackin a great hole in the rocks. He was soon inside it, still riding high in the water and passing through a long tunnel. Then, dazed, but still holding on to the horse's mane and his bullwhip, he came shooting out in the light.

He did not hear the boisterous laughter and yells of five men who suddenly appeared on the high rocks forming the bank at the right side of the stream. He did see the loops of two long ropes that bit through the air, reaching for him and Gabriel's Trumpet. Had they caught, they would have swerved man and horse to the edge of the stream where a broad shelf of rock would have allowed them a way up from the water. But the castings were ill-timed.

The ropes swirled together, tangled, and came down on the water a yard to

Bullwhip Bill's right. He could have flung out his hand and caught them, but he ignored them, knowing only trouble could come from the bearded ruffians on the bank.

It looked as if he had embraced only suicide a few minutes later. He was whirled around a long bend to where the river knifed its way through a tall ridge that looked like a gash through the roof of a monstrous house. Ahead came the terrific spilling roar of a giant waterfall.

McCrackin saw it in time, and he saw his chance at the same moment. Dead ahead of him the river narrowed against the face of a cliff. There was no turn here for the water. The river was simply plunging away in a deep black hole, the water roaring and spouting down and down over hundreds of feet of rocks where man and horse would be instantly killed.

McCRACKIN saw the end of a tree that had lodged in a V-shaped gash in the rocks to his right. The water-soaked old whip streaked out. Its ends wrapped around the broken spur of a limb. Then, quickly reaching forward to seize Gabriel's Trumpet by the bits to keep his head up, McCrackin made the swing, right hand gripping the butt of the fastened whip.

It was as if the river understood that two victims were about to escape its sucking currents. The whip slipped an inch or two. The water sucked and pulled with the horse fighting desperately and placing all his confidence in his master. McCrackin hauled him against the bank of the stream, then up and up along the whip until man and horse could find footing at the butt of the tree.

The gash in the rocks was just wide enough for Gabriel's Trumpet to stumble into it. Brush concealed them, growing in a tangle overhead, and leaving the horse for the moment, McCrackin turned back to the stream, looking for Buffalo Jack and his old black.

Buffalo Jack's horse came swirling around the bend. The old man was nowhere in sight. McCrackin waited desperately until the last moment for him to appear, and then shot his whip forward. The end of it settled around the forward bulge of the old Indian saddle, and McCrackin sawed back. He turned the horse over on his side with the black fighting the water and his head going under. Had it taken a minute longer the horse would have drowned, but McCrackin dragged him in with the current now appearing to turn its efforts to help him. When the horse stumbled up from the water, McCrackin turned back, still looking for Buffalo Jack.

The old man never came. McCrackin was about to give up watching for him, deciding that he had been captured by the five men on the bank of the stream or had foolishly grabbed one of their ropes. As he started to turn away from the edge of the water, he halted at a wild pound of hoofs and a burst of excited voices sounded somewhere above him.

"Gone!" One of the voices bellowed that above the place where the river dived into the hole. "Both of 'em! I told yuh not to let Jinx Brady handle a rope! That's the fourth time he's messed my throw, an' ever'time he messes it, somebody gets killed! Them dudes make seven men who've been teased into Death Hole Valley only to be killed! There'll be hell about this. Rube Banner wanted both of 'em alive—an' yuh know why he wanted old Buffalo Jack!"

HE WAITED a long time. He took off his soaked clothing, wringing the water out of them. From his old war-bag with a strip of heavy canvas around it he found a few dry articles. The darkness was not long in settling after that, but the sounds of hoofs and angry voices con-

tinued to come to him from time to time. It was evident that the men of this Death Hole Valley did not know about the V-shaped gash where McCrackin hid.

Leaving the horses behind, he moved cautiously up to the top of a rim-rocked rise.

The glow of a lantern next caught his eye, coming from the black cliffs. Soon he was able to tell there were two men on guard up there. If he tried to let the horses out of the V-shaped gash behind him, and if they were fortunate enough to find their own way down from the knoll, they would be seen.

His whip was the next best thing. It hung there in his hand like a wet snake. Placing his rifle against a clump of brush where he could find it, he started forward.

The river was making enough noise even a this point to make the sounds faint, but he soon located the horses. They stood at a crude hitchrack in a little clearing in the sagebrush. Each animal was saddled, and each horse had a rifle hanging in a long leather boot such as cavalrymen carried. He searched about a little more, and found the trail.

He started up, bullwhip ready in his hand, a six-shooter shoved forward in its wet holster under his left. He caught the odor of boiling coffee and broiling steaks, and the thought of why he had ever stopped in Windy Butte came back to him. A short time later he heard voices, but the noise of the river muffled the words.

He was finally at a bend in the ledge. Now he could see the burning lantern, one evidently used by the men when moving up and down the trail. Beyond the lantern, screened by rocks until now, a little fire was burning with two men squatting over it. Each man was dressed like a cowpuncher with six-shooters at his hips.

"Mine's done enough!"

McCrackin heard that, and saw the larger of the two men rise and move back from the fire with a big steak on the end of a forked stick. McCrackin's eyes gleamed hungrily. The smell of the coffee was like a drug in his nostrils. He fingered his whip.

"Go to it!" ordered the smaller man. "Pat an' Charley'll be along purty soon to let us turn in. I don't see much use in settin' a guard up here all the time."

"Let Rube Banner hear that, an' he'll cut yore throat!" flashed the other man. "He was in a mighty bad mood when he come in over the short-cut. Judd got killed, yuh know. That short fella they shoved through the river done it, they say, an' he ain't none too happy 'bout our fine bird gettin' away six days ago."

The man halted, cocking his head and listening. McCrackin saw the man step back, look up, and drop his forked stick and the steak to throw his right hand to the butt of a six-shooter. A leaping cougar could not have been quicker.

McCrackin saw a dark shape rise on a ledge above the man. It plunged forward, both hands outstretched. There was a cry, at once cut short by the colliding form of the leaping man. The man who had held the steak went down, clawing for his gun. The other man snarled, whirling away from the fire.

There was no use in a man waiting. Whoever the fellow was who had made the leap, he was certainly no friend of the gent at the fire. McCrackin's old whip shot forward. The sun-cured rawhide lash on the end of it struck the second man on the neck. It rocked him back, sweeping his breath away. Suddenly in terrible pain, his hands clawed for his throat.

Again the whip licked forward, a live thing in action now. It caught the speechless man by the wrist. McCrackin gave the whip a fierce jerk. It stumbled the man over the struggling pair on the ledge. Before the speechless man could recover,

The man was backing away. . . .

McCrackin had struck again. This time the lash plucked like a beak at the bridge of the man's nose.

With a half-strangled cry of terror, the victim of the whip staggered to the rim of the ledge, slipped, and went plunging like a spinning cartwheel into the river below.

McCrackin now hurried forward, the whip coiling back on his wrist like a trained snake returning to its master. The two men on the rocks were fighting desperately. By the lantern light McCrackin saw that the one who had leaped from the ledge was dirty and ragged, a matted beard covering his face. He saw something else at the same time. It was a broken pair of handcuffs on the man's wrists.

McCrackin stepped in close. Watching his chance, he brought the butt of his whip down on the head of the man with six-shooters at his hips, dropping him like a limp rag. The other man then plunged to his feet, gray eyes glaring.

"Take it easy, fella!" ordered McCrackin. "I ain't wantin' to hurt yuh until I know who I'm hurtin'!"

He halted, staring. For once he had been slow. The man had snatched up a six-shooter and was slowly trying to back away. In his eyes there was something that reminded McCrackin of a wolf.

"Easy, fella." McCrackin spoke gently, as if facing a madman.

"I heard, all right!" nodded the man, speaking jerkily. "Just taking no chance with anybody in this hell-hole."

Then, as the man turned slightly so that the lantern light swept him up and down, McCrackin saw a silver star glitter on the left side of his ragged vest.

At that instant, as if many things were to happen at once, a far-away scream came from the valley, and right behind it came a harsh crash of shots and a burst of wild yells.

CHAPTER SIX

"Grab Yourself a Horse!"

"I'M SAM HORN," the man with the star was admitting. "Got a joker put to me one night at the jail in a cup of coffee. My good deputy did that—Fate Goode. I knew he was a confounded crook, but I was foolishly waiting to get the real goods on him and break his neck. No matter now." He looked hatefully down the valley. "Came to my senses here, so many weeks ago it seems like years. I got away from the gang six days ago. I'm damned near starved."

He had already taken the cartridge belts and the second six-shooter away from the man McCrackin had knocked cold with the butt of the whip. The man was still lying there like a dead-limber drunk, and Horn turned to snatch up one of the big steaks.

McCrackin's mouth watered as he

watched it disappear with Horn eating like a famished wolf. A man simply did not have the heart to reach for the second steak, and McCrackin was soon watching it disappear, but he could have wept when Horn finished the coffee, draining it to the grounds.

"You'll find no way out of here except by this trail," the man went on in answer to McCrackin's questions. Then he had nodded savagely, "I know they brought Jenny North in. It was the last straw to make me come out in the open and get shot. They paraded her up and down the valley just before dark. They yelled that Buffalo Jack was coming. I think a lot of old Buffalo.

"The whole seat of this cow and sheep business lies here, you see. Once this is wiped out, it's all wiped out. The Banner Boys are the ring-leaders—Rube, the boss; Judd, Wax, Bud and Dode. We're not more than a dozen miles from Windy Butte by the short cut. They can duck in and out here, playing the part of ranchers on the outside, and badmen back here. I have all the evidence, enough to hang them and send the sheep back to where they belong—if we ever get out of here with enough of the gang to hang—"

"—which looks fairly easy now, Sam," put in a voice behind McCrackin.

Bullwhip whirled, his hand flashing to the butt of a six-shooter as a lean ghost in buckskins stepped forward with his rifle and his old Avalanche.

"Buffalo Jack!" Sam Horn was going forward with a leap, throwing his arms around the old hunter. "This fellow said you—"

"No matter what he said," cut in the old man. "I'm here. Got outa that river down there by lettin' my hoss go an' crawlin' up a crack after they thought me an' McCrackin an' both hosses went in the hole. . . .

"At least seventeen men are in the valley, countin' us. I've heard enough to know they're agoin' to make yuh come to turn. Goin' to tie Jenny on a' outlaw hoss with a lot of shirts an' such like to make 'em flap an' drive the hoss crazy as hell. They say that'll fetch yuh. It would, too—any man who loves a gal like yuh love Jenny! An' I know why they ain't killed yuh. They know yo've been writin' up yore evidence, an' sendin' it to somebody for safe-keepin'. They wanta know who—"

Another burst of shots came from down the valley. The old man cocked his head to one side, listening.

"There's sommers 'round sixteen bad 'uns in the valley now," nodded the old man. "Rube Banner killed a fella named Jinx Brady soon after I got to prowlin'. Guess he's finished off a duck named Andy Jarvis. He was mad as hell, Rube was. He—"

Again he was cut off. This time it was by the sound of hoofs up the ledge and around a black shoulder of rock. Dragging the unconscious outlaw with them, they moved back, crowding into a blob of shadow beyond the range of the lantern light. McCrackin kept between them and the ledge, the deadly bullwhip ready.

IT WAS a short wait. A tall horseman appeared. He pulled up on the ledge, staring nervously at the burning lantern. A star glittered on his chest. Without waiting for anything else, McCrackin's long whip shot out. Ever like a snake, the end of it slashed three quick turns around the rider's neck. There was a jerk with the man horrified and unable to speak as his hands clawed for the mysterious thing shutting off his breath. He fell heavily onto the rocks, his startled horse moving on down the ledge.

"A little playmate of yores," grinned McCrackin to Horn. "Mr. Fate Goode, I believe!"

Horn was already leaping forward. Goode was jerked to his knees, still

clawing at that terrible thing around his neck that was choking the life out of him. Sam Horn's driving fist, smashing to the side of the man's face, turned him sprawling on his side

"And now I'll get these damned broken handcuffs off of my wrists!" exclaimed Horn, searching the unconscious Goode's pockets until he found a small key. "Then, Mr. Goode, we'll put your own handcuffs on you!"

"Yuh won't need to bother in a minute," grinned McCrackin. "He's chokin' to death right now. Just give 'im a kick over the ledge. The river'll take care of the carrion."

"I want him alive!" said the real sheriff of Windy Butte, whipping the unconscious man's hands behind his back and snapping the handcuffs on his wrists.

He hastily fashioned a gag out of Goode's big black neckerchief, forcing it into the man's mouth. He hurled the handcuffed man back in the shadows—and he was just in time.

Hoofs again sounded on the ledge above them. Once more they crowded back. The sheriff knew the possibilities of that infernal whip by this time, and he gave McCrackin all the room he could.

"Bush Yawberry!" hissed the sheriff as a second man fell victim to the whip. Horn leaped forward to batter the big deputy further into unconsciousness. "Luck seems on my side tonight!"

"Yeah, an' I see he's packin' two pair of handcuffs," nodded Buffalo Jack. "Better put a pair on this duck McCrackin hit with the butt of his whip. This good luck business ain't goin' to last. Somebody's comin' up the valley right now."

TWO horsemen were coming, riding slowly and with extreme caution. From what McCrackin had heard one of the guards say on the ledge just before Horn made his attack, the men would be Pat and Charley.

Buffalo Jack had been hurriedly left behind to command the ledge.

McCrackin and Horn had slipped quickly down. Goode's and Yawberry's horses had gone on, losing themselves in the heavy brush and low pines against the foot of the cliffs.

"Yuh go on, Pat!" ordered one of the oncoming riders, pulling his horse to a halt more than a hundred yards from the foot of the cliffs. "I'll sorter lie back. I ain't trustin' my own shadow with Big Sam runnin' loose in the dark."

McCrackin swore under his breath, the tension bringing icy beads of perspiration out on his forehead. Here was something McCrackin had been afraid of from the moment he had seen the riders coming.

The man called Pat looked at the two horses standing peacefully at the hitch-rack, and swore something about a man being afraid. Dismounting, he moved on up the trail with the noise of the river soon drowning his footsteps.

It was all up to old Buffalo Jack now. When a minute passed and there was no noise of excitement from the ledge, McCrackin was beginning to take hope, but the man called Charley, still keeping his distance, was taking no chances.

McCrackin heard him lift his voice into a shout: "Is it all right, Pat?"

It was then that the hell broke loose.

"Naw, it *ain't!*" screeched a wild voice from the ledge. "Buffalo Jack—"

The voice was cut short. There was a wild scramble of booted feet, then the long-ringing crash of a muzzle-loader rifle. That sound was punctuated by another screech, and looking along the moonlit face of the cliffs, McCrackin saw a loose figure wheel out into space. It was Pat, spinning like a buzzard shot out of the sky down to the swift waters of the river below.

Roaring six-shooters in Sheriff Big Sam Horn's hands jerked McCrackin's stare back to the man called Charley.

Riding Indian-fashion, he was making his getaway.

McCrackin started shooting. He saw Charley's horse go down, and it looked as if the rider had gone down under the horse. Then McCrackin glimpsed him a moment later, running as if forty devils were chasing him, dodging in the shadows. The fellow's voice followed, wailing in frantic waves up and down the valley in a way to awaken the dead.

"Got to travel now!" cried Horn. "Grab yourself a horse!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Three Warriors of Drum Head

THEY banged down the valley on the horses of the two guards, keeping as closely as possible to the cliffs off to their right. The lamplight in the trees still glared at them like an eye daring them to do their worst.

"Close enough, fella!" McCrackin caught Horn's reins. "We're makin' enough noise to tell the whole cockeyed world we're comin'. Hit the ground."

The light went out a few minutes later as some one covered a narrow window with heavy oat bags.

"Takin' no chances," whispered McCrackin. Gimme a start of fifteen shots, then shake it back to yore hole."

He moved away quickly. He found a grass-choked little dry-wash, and slipped into it.

Two horsemen were coming, spurring and quirting furiously. One right behind the other, they jumped their horses over the wash, riding on toward the head of the valley. A few minutes later McCrackin heard Buffalo Jack's old Avalanche let go both barrels of damnation. Cries of terror, screeches of pain came echoing down the valley.

Passing within a few yards of the men, McCrackin came to a big, four-room log house under the trees. Beyond it were sod-roofed stables and a big corral, where horses were being caught.

McCrackin wormed his way up behind the stables, found a window and eased inside, then out through a hallway.

A tall man in a white hat lurched toward him. When the man was ten feet away McCrackin caught the odor of whiskey. The fellow was weaving up to a saddle hanging on a peg.

Reversing his whip, McCrackin sent the heavy butt flying. Not only was that butt thick, it held fifty-one buckshot as a belly. With a stroke that might have come from a hammer, it struck the side of the man's head. There was a short grunt, and the man was down.

McCrackin bounced forward. Jamming the big white hat on his head, he caught its former owner by the back of the collar, and dragged him into the dark hallway. There, he leaned the limp body up against the wall.

"Hurry up, Wax!" A voice snarled at him as he stepped back under the shed. "Rube knows yo're drunk as a fool! Yuh saw what he's done tonight. Don't let 'im get on yuh. He'll kill yuh. He—"

A burst of shooting cut the man off.

Sheriff Big Sam Horn was following orders—but it was death to the man who had turned. The butt of McCrackin's old bullwhip was again in action.

The man settled into a bundle on the ground. McCrackin finished his second job as he had finished his first, disposing of the body in the same manner.

He took down the saddle the man called Wax had reached for, and in a moment was throwing it on a horse standing tied at the edge of she shed. He swung up. Just for the second, there was but one man in sight.

Another fusillade of shots from the hidden sheriff helped, for the man on the horse turned his head for a mo-

ment. He swung back, an oath on his lips, as McCrackin rode up.

Again the butt of that terrible whip flung into action. It caught the man on the iron-gray across the face, rocking him backward in his saddle. McCrackin struck again, then for the third time as the man was falling, and calmly rode right on to the front door of the house just as it was flung open. Two men with Winchesters came racing out.

McCrackin swung from his saddle, pushed open the door, and shot a burly man down in the center of the room before that worthy realized that the devil had walked in.

He saw all the rest of the room at a glance. A burning oil lamp sitting on a table, a tall, pretty girl sitting in the corner looking at him with wide blue eyes and a chain, running to a heavy iron ring in the wall, locked her left ankle.

There was an old cast-iron stove to his left, and sizzling in an iron pan was a huge steak. Beside the pan, singing like an old hen in the distance, was an iron teakettle full of strong coffee. The odors made McCrackin lick his lips.

His whip shot out in time. It cracked like a .38-40 around the lamp chimney, throwing the room in darkness just as a shot roared at him through a crack in the wall. The bullet passed an inch behind the back of his neck. It went on, smashing into the iron frying pan, and hurling the steak on the floor.

"An' I don't yet get myself fed!" snarled McCrackin, moving on toward the girl in the corner. "Damndest starvation country I ever saw!"

GUNFIRE rolled over the valley. Slaughter was taking place every time men charged the ledge where Buffalo Jack was holding forth with old Avalanche. Rifles smashed bullets on the rocks, silencing the roaring old guns up there for long intervals. Still, the renegades kept trying to charge. After each spell of silence from the ledge the roaring up there increased. Buffalo Jack was holding his end of the valley against all comers!

Sheriff Big Sam Horn saw that. He kept working himself closer to the house, and the outlaws, themselves, were at work on the house. Time after time, Horn saw men charge it. He saw them fall back, reeling and rocking in their saddles and cursing each other. Whoever that man was with the bullwhip, he was a fighting bat out of hell!

Horn wormed his way up behind the stables. Without knowing it, he eased through the same window McCrackin had gone through. He made his way into the hallway.

He halted, staring. The body of Wax Banner lay against the wall, the wide-open eyes of the stiffening white face still open and sightless. Just beyond it lay the body of Bud Banner. Whispered voices came to him then from one of the stables across the hallway.

"Ain't got a show, I'm tellin' yuh," a man was arguing. "Rube's dead, lyin' out there by the corral gate. Yuh saw what's happened to Wax an' Bud. Looks like a grizzly bear mauled 'em."

Horn, now taking advantage of the noise, stepped quickly across the hallway. Guns started jumping in his hands. There was a yell of terror as the two men hiding there tried to break through a closed door and get away. One went down. The other rushed out into the corral, yelling, "The whole place is surrounded, boys!"

Then a loud voice started ringing over the valley.

"Lay down yore fightin' tools, boys! Yuh ain't got a chance. Walk toward the house with yore hands up! This is yore last chance!"

The voice had come from inside the house, and there was sense to it. Fighting men stopped to think. Half the men in

the valley had already been killed. Half of those who were left carried some wound. Death was the only thing they could gain.

Horn saw men start toward the house with their hands in the air. A shout of voices down the valley came a few moments later. Horn shifted his position, and saw a small army of men coming down the valley. More than twenty rifles glittered in the moonlight. The riders were swinging out, forming a circle to surround the house.

Wonderingly, Horn stepped out into the light, and heard Buffalo Jack's old voice screech out of the night:

"Yuh oughta jes' waited a little while longer, McCrackin!" the old man was storming. "We'd a-wiped 'em out complete. That part of her dress they took off of Jenny an' tore up—well, it marked a way for the folks in them four wagons to get their own crowd an' come back . . ."

McCRACKIN was not even listening. He was herding prisoners into the dark back room and fastening them in. There was a delicious odor in his nose—the fragrant bouquet of boiling coffee and frying steak on the stove as Jenny North, with the chain removed from her ankle, handled the pot and the pan.

"Lay off!" roared McCrackin when the sheriff bolted through the door to seize the girl in his arms. "All this hooraw can wait! This time I'm goin' to say I've et, even if I have to whang that old Ancient Merino in buckskins over the head with a gun! After that, I'm gettin' my hoss out of a hole an' ridin' on. There's just one thing yuh all can bear in mind: The next time I'm hungry, I shore ain't comin' to Windy Butte!"

THE END

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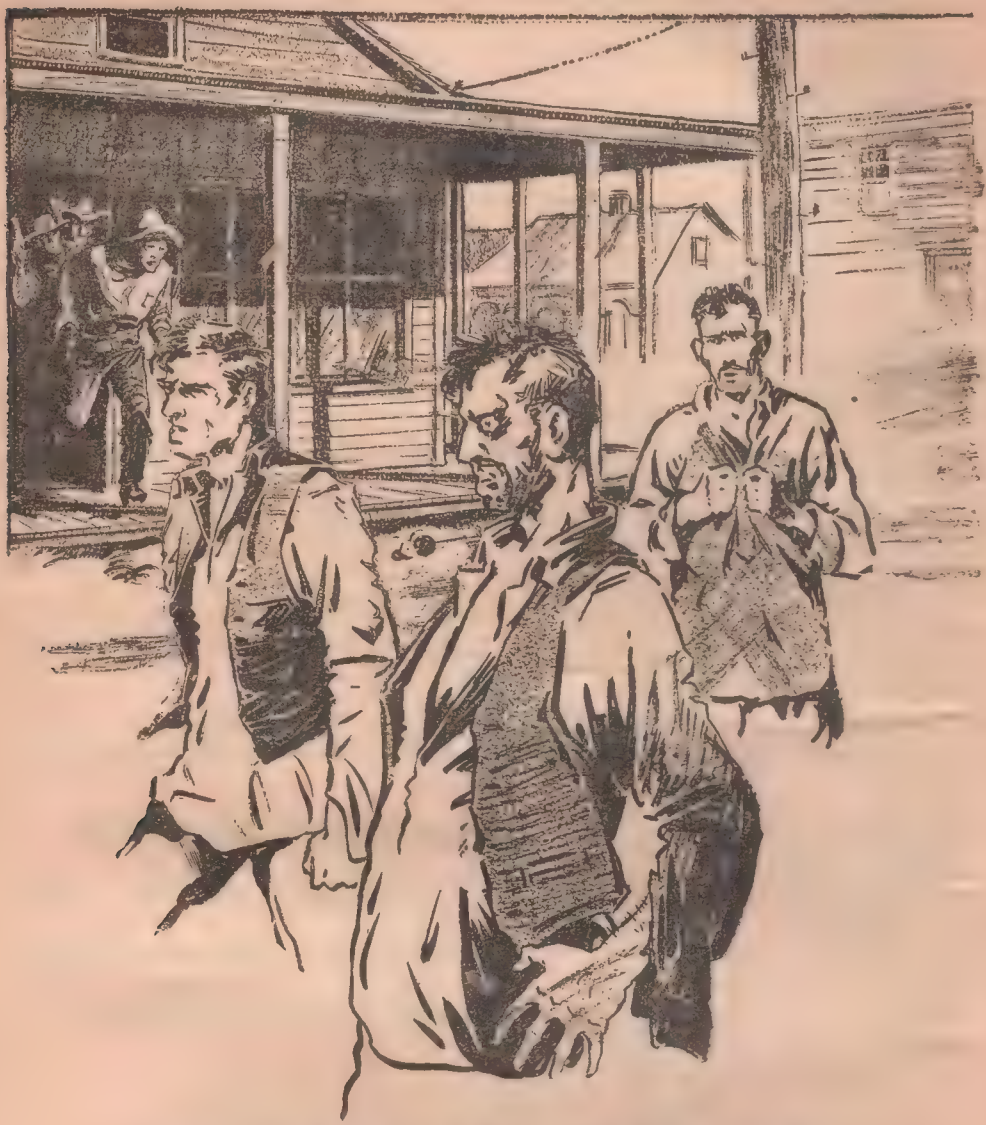


By HARRY F. OLMSTED

It was only natural for loyal Hoss Greer to ride a hundred miles to clear Bill Dunkirk of the ugly charge of brand-blotting. But those who knew Hoss best could not believe their eyes when they saw Hoss slap his innocent young friend back behind the bars—and then start brewing a deadly dose of hemp tea for the prisoner!

CHAPTER ONE

The Thirteenth Juror

ENEMIES of Hoss Greer maintained, without becoming too articulate, that he was a devil from hell, a cold and ruthless killer at liberty only because he enjoyed a strong pull in high places. His friends—and they were

Smashing Novel of one of the saltiest, best-loved characters in Western fiction!

Granite City still talks of the time when Hoss hazed those three shirt-tail gunmen down the street. . . .

legion—were equally as sure that he was activated by a Samaritan tenderness of heart, and by a code of honor that no human frailty could tarnish. Both views were honest, according to individual experience. Both were right, and—strangely—both were wrong.

It is true that Hoss might have made much use of his prominent connections, though he did not. It is equally true that the law had pardoned many of his eruptions, chiefly because he was right, and his habit of direct action had a healthy influence on a wide rangeland too vast for the law to cover. But Hoss was no crusader. Whatever the moment held for him, he met with compassion, frigid calm, volcanic savagery or smiling contempt. Any Arizona pioneer will tell you that Old Hoss Greer was as impossible to predict as a lightning bolt—and about as dangerous to fool with.

His trouble with Shiloh Grimes, in Granite City, turned light on the many facets of his character.

Taking it easy, at his headquarters ranch at Tres Alamos, Old Hoss was perusing the *Weekly Democrat,* sent him

regularly from Granite City. One little news item held his interest. It recounted the capture and arraignment of one Bill Dunkirk, owner of a two-bit cow spread.

Dunkirk, it recited, had been found with a running iron in his hand and his Rocking MD burned over twelve of Shiloh Grimes' Flying U critters. Bill Dunkirk, the article said, would go on trial April twenty-sixth. That was yesterday.

Old Hoss didn't hesitate. He never did where his friends were concerned. And young Bill Dunkirk had earned Hoss' friendship by throwing in his gun that time time Hoss had been waylaid by six Mex killers, sent by some enemy to rub him out. Hoss never had learned the author of that plot, for there had been no survivor among the six.

The fact that Dunkirk, a total stranger, had faced death to side a man he had never seen appealed to all that was best in the grizzled cowman. An uncanny judge of men, he accepted this friendship born in blood, and repaid it handsomely. Learning of Dunkirk's financial uncertainty, he loaned him the money to buy a little spread adjoining one of his own outfits, the Packsaddle, out of Granite City. Thus grazing rights long coveted by Hoss himself came into possession of his friend. And Dunkirk had proven himself worthy of the friendship by paying back every cent of the loan.

The speed with which Hoss now lit out for Granite City attested the length to which the old cowman would go for one he liked, and believed in.

Hoss rode into Granite City at noon, having covered a little better than a hundred miles without food or rest across the rugged Mazatzals and timbered Mogollons. It was a real test of horsemanship and endurance, yet Hoss showed little effect of the abuse. His sorrel was far from done. And Hoss looked fresh as a daisy, save for shadows of fatigue under his puckered eyes.

SUNLIGHT lay hard and bright on the town's main drag. Hitchracks were jammed with teams and saddle ponies, and men moved in a slow tide along the walks, stiff and intolerant as strange bulldogs, glaring across the dusty thoroughfare but never speaking.

It was a scene Old Hoss Greer had looked upon many times before—an old pattern born in the passion of prehistoric warriors and never changing when the slumbering hates and elemental jealousies of violent men were roused in partisanship. Cowboys of the big cattle outfits trod one walk; nesters and small cowmen the other. Hoss knew most of them and he tossed his hand a dozen times in greeting between the town border and the feed barn, but not one hand was thrown up in salute.

"They gotta know where I stand," murmured Hoss, with a bitter little chuckle, "before they bust down an' git friendly. Twelve measly cows with tampered brands. Not worth one drop of a good man's blood, yet they may cost a human life for each cow! Men are funny critters!"

Hoss watched the slow restlessness of Granite City with a cool, attentive eye. The impact of danger stirring chill tides along his spine. Then he had turned into the stable, acknowledging the grin of the toothless old hostler with: "Hi yuh, Bourbon? Rub my horse down with a pint of forty-rod, let him cool for a half hour an' then let him have all he'll drink. After that—double oats."

"Got yuh, Hoss," said the hostler, but his faded eyes were far from attentive. He rolled his quid, spat a brown stream and said: "Purty danged tough on yore friend, Bill Dunkirk, him goin' bad all of a sudden. How you stand on that deal, Hoss?"

"Hard to tell till I get all the facts, Bourbon. But you can be downright shore it won't be in the middle."

He walked out of the barn's coolness, pausing in the sun to look along the walk. Some vague emanation from the crowd touched him, sweeping away his weariness like chalk from a blackboard, setting up in him the acute hunger of one who finds absolute release in action.

Across the street and down a few doors, he spotted a group that took his full interest. Mary Dunkirk stood there, the tenseness of desperation in her slim body, pride and defiance in the turn of her square shoulders. Half encircling her, their faces reflecting their embarrassment, were five of the biggest cowmen on Negrito range.

The Santell boys—Tom and Eph, who controlled the Apache Hills—on the east side of the river. Torvo Tilotson, of the Anchor Bar. Back Ben Bardin, whiskered and taciturn, whose claim to fame was that he had taken his toll in the Tonto Basin War and had come through it with out a scratch. And Tim Mears, who had soldiered with Crook, in the Geronimo campaign.

With them stood a sixth man—an angular six-footer with pale blue, restless eyes and a flat-fleshed, bony face. More carefully dressed than the run of cowmen, there was about him a dangerous litheness and a vast scorn that contrasted strangely with the homely ruggedness of the others.

Hoss caught the flash and flare of this stranger's eyes as he came bowlegging up. Then he was looking at Mary Dunkirk, Bill's pretty wife, as she cut off her low, intense speech. She turned her trim head to look at him, and Hoss saw the twin spots of red suddenly burn in her cheeks, caught the haunting look of fear in hazel eyes that he had heretofore known only as warm and laughing and roguish.

She murmured: "Why hello, Mister Greer." And then, as if recognizing the hopelessness of further talk, she ran a wan smile about the circle. "Thank you, gentlemen, for listening to me." Whereupon she turned with a rustling of plaited skirts, and was gone. And Hoss saw the quick dropping of her face to hide the tears squeezing from her eyes.

Now Hoss regarded the cowmen, whose outfits neighbored the largest of the Greer spreads. Very soberly, he said: "Howdy, boys. Glad to see you." And shook hands all around.

Tom Santell said: "We was hopin' you'd show up, Hoss. Knowin' how you once felt about Bill Dunkirk, it might have been mighty easy for you to hold the wrong idea about him, without gettin' all the facts, first-hand. Hoss, shake hands with Shiloh Grimes. He's the new boss of the Flying U."

A bold and unconvincing smile mantled Grimes' gaunt face as he murmured: "Pleased," and stuck out his hand. Hoss inclined his head, without a word, grimacing his displeasure as Grimes numbed his fingers with a vicelike grip.

"Never saw a man," he had been known to say, "that tries to crush a gent's hand when he shakes who won't put the same crush on a man when he gets a neighbor in a squeeze."

He tore his hand loose from that grip, a spray of fine wrinkles appearing at the corner of his eyes as he fixed his full interest on the man.

"Dunkirk got a little short-sighted in glassin' up yore brand, eh, Grimes?"

"Short-sighted?" The man's laugh rolled along the street. "Yeah, that's a good one. He went plumb blind, Greer. Well, he picked on the wrong man. I'm making an example of him, my friend. And that's what I'd like to talk to you about. I'm taking the lead in organizing the Negrito Valley Protective Association—all of us big cowmen banding together to run the rustlers, the beef-hungry nesters and riff-raff out of this scope of country. How do you feel about it?"

A CHILL little smile played about Hoss' lips as he followed a crack in the walk boards with his boot toe. "Can't say I'm interested, Grimes. Ain't much of a j'iner, myself. Always try to get along with folks, but when I can't, I take care of the trouble myself. You understand? I tromp my own snakes."

"You're crazy!" Grimes' face was suddenly red. "That way goes back to Injun days—every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost! Times change, Greer, and we must change with 'em. Today is a day of coöperation. We must all get together to wipe out this sneakin' lawlessness of men like Dunkirk. What are we to think, Greer, if you won't come in with us? What can we think, especially when you sponsored Dunkirk? You've got a responsibility that—"

"Don't lecture me, Grimes." Old Hoss failed to withhold his growing anger, and it showed in his eyes. "You're wastin' your breath."

"We got no quarrel, boys," soothed Torvo Tillotson. "Grimes don't know you as well as we do, Hoss. He's an up-talkin' man who don't mince words. But he means all right, just as you do. We're all losin' cattle, an' all the signs point to the two-bit nester spreads. It's blowin' up a fight between us an' them an' we'd admire to have you with us."

Hoss shook his head, smiling a little. "What's cow ranchin' comin' to?" he demanded. "What ails a goin' outfit when it can't take care of its own rustlin' trouble?"

"How have you taken care of it, Greer?" asked Grimes smoothly, "on the Packsaddle, for instance."

"Ain't nobody rustled from the Packsaddle, that I know of."

"Why?" Grimes' long face, pale with suppressed passion, jutted into Hoss'. "I say it's mighty funny that we've all lost cattle to your friend Dunkirk, and you've had no loss whatever. Why?"

The inference was plain, and it brought a fighting grin to Hoss' features. "I take that unkindly, Grimes," he said softly. "The day will come when you'll be glad to eat them words."

"Not for you, nor any other man, Greer." Tall and rage-filled, all of Grimes' smooth composure had fled. He stood stiff and ready.

Old Hoss laughed silently. "That's a bet, Grimes," he said, and turned abruptly away.

"Hey, Hoss, wait a minute," Torvo Tillotson called after him, but Hoss gave no indication he had heard as he ambled through the ranks of restless punchers pacing the walks.

CHAPTER TWO

Gun-Seed on the Wind

DOWN at the jail, Harley Hopper, beardless kid deputy, heard Hoss' request with obvious embarrassment. The summer before he had worked as jingler of the Packsaddle. Hoss had known his mother for many years and had seen the kid grow up.

"Sure, Mister Greer," he said, trying to smile. "You can see Bill, I reckon. Sheriff told me not to let anybody into his cell, but you can talk to him through the bars. His wife's in there now."

"Take me to him, Harl," muttered Hoss, and followed the boy into the cell block.

Bill's wife stood before the cell, her face within inches of that of the imprisoned man. And Hoss reflected that this was just another of the stern tests this range had imposed upon this Eastern girl whom life had shielded from trouble before her marriage to Dunkirk. Her eyes were red from crying, but there was a brave lift to her shoulders as she turned to face the old cowman.

"Hello, Mary," said Hoss; then he was

gripping Bill's hand through the bars. "I sure hate to find you like this, Bill," he said. "How's the trial goin'?"

"Terrible." The hopelessness in Bill's voice didn't escape Hoss. "They've got a dozen lyin' witnesses against me, Hoss, an' all I've got is my word. It's all over. The judge gave it to the jury an' they're out to lunch now. It won't take 'em ten minutes to put me away, once they start deliberatin'. By night, I'll be on my way to prison."

"No, Bill!" Mary scolded him. "You mustn't say that. You're innocent and—"

"What happened?" Hoss broke in. "Tell it from the beginning, Bill."

"I went up into the breaks of the Apache Hills," began Dunkirk, "lookin' for a little bunch of yearlin's I'd missed. Saw a smoke curlin' up outa Bobcat Canyon—you know the place?"

Hoss nodded. "Go on, Bill."

"Well, I found a pole barrier across the canyon, a dozen bawling critters held there. Before the fence a small fire smouldered, two runnin' irons stickin' out ot it. I picked one up, stood there studyin' it, wonderin' who had been brandin' there an' what had become of him, when there was a rush of riders up the gulch—Flying U punchers. They grabbed me, discovered the twelve critters had been fresh ironed, changing the Flying U into my Rocking MD, an' they taken me down to the jailhouse. I didn't do it, Hoss. I—"

"Who you think did, Bill?" Hoss's words snapped like bullets. "Who might be interested in making your mark on Flying U cattle?"

"I know," muttered Dunkirk, savagely. "It was Shiloh Grimes. He's been rousing the big ranches against the little fellers for some time now. An' he's got into the habit lately of coming to my place when I'm away, being sugar-nice to Mary, and preaching that she's too fine a gal to be wearing out her life on a two-bit cow-outfit. Preaching big money, travel, silks an' furs an'—"

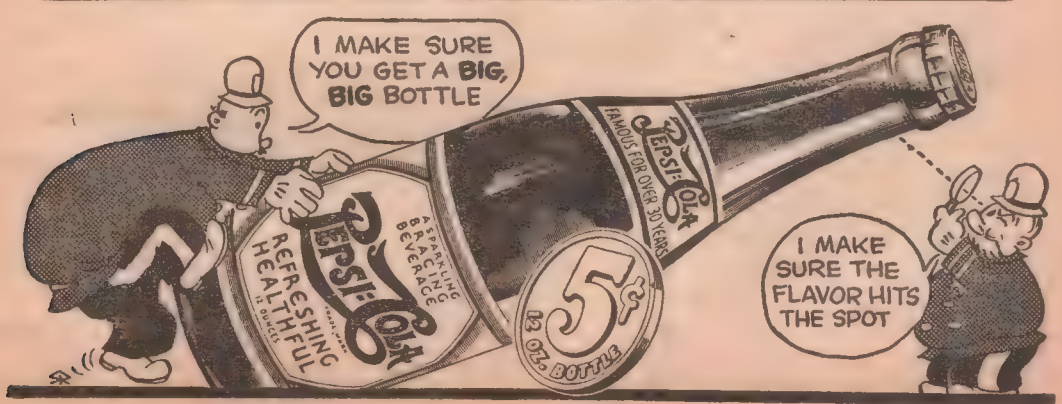
Hoss turned to the weeping girl. "He make a play for you, did he?"

She shook her head vehemently. "No, Mister Greer. Not—not yet. Up to now he's just tried to make me dissatisfied, like I was some scatterbrained hill girl who had never known the things he pictures. But he has frightened me. I knew if I couldn't discourage him, and God knows I've done everything I could think of, there would be trouble between him and Bill."

"It's an old, old pattern," nodded Hoss. "And it don't change much. Hang an' rattle!"

He left them there, went to the street.

INQUIRY took him to the American Kitchen, principal Chinese restaurant in Granite City. Here he found the jury eating their mid-day meal at three tables.



At the head of the table Sheriff Blant Cramer presided with taciturn formality, his eyes on the jurors and on anyone who might approach them. He spotted Old Hoss the moment he crossed the threshold, but his warning frown only whetted the cowman's recklessness.

"Blant!" Hoss cried gaily, moving toward the lawman with hand extended. "Right glad to see you, Sheriff. Couldn't get here for the trial of my good friend, Dunkirk, so I've gotta get the dope second hand. It's plain as the veined nose on your face, Blant, that Bill has been framed by Grimes an' . . ."

"Greer!" Cramer's voice thundered through the dining room as he came up, red-faced and waggling a finger in Hoss' face. "You keep your big mouth shut, savvy? This jury is out, an' they ain't to hear one more word about the trial. If you violate that, you'll go to jail for contempt; I'll see to that. Now shut up an' get away from us."

Hoss, aping contrition, backed away, bowing apologetically as he ran his eyes along the board.

Among the twelve good men and true, only one was a cowman. Among the rest were businessmen of the town: Wade Snyder, of the General Store. Mike Meagher, who owned the Mustang Saloon. Dud Hilton, the stableman. Sandy Love, the hardware man. Lee Selph, saddler, and Dutch Henry Shoefeld—the bootmaker. All his friends of long standing—including Abel Kearns, boss of the AK Connected.

"Sorry, Sheriff," Hoss said, meekly. "I didn't mean nothin' by this carelessness. Knowed better too. Gosh, yes! I certainly don't want my ol' friend, Judge Wolcott throwin' no book at me. Do your duty, men, an' don't mind me. See you later."

He went to the counter, crawled onto a stool and gave the Chink his order. He was only a few feet from the jury table, and as he waited he muttered to himself.

"Let's see. Fourteen tons of hay last year, from Dud Hilton. Something over two hundred dollars. If I was to ship it in, I'd save close to half that. Sinful waste, I calls it. An' grub; that's a big item. Musta paid Wade Snyder better'n a couple uh thousand, mebby more, when I could just as well have bought wholesale in Phoenix. Blacksmith supplies from Sandy Love, cartridges an' wire. Saddles an' harness from Lee Selph an' boots from Dutch Henry. Not to mention my outfit's likker bill from Mike Meagher. *Hm-m-m-m,* it adds up to a purty penny. No wonder there ain't no profit from the Packsaddle. Looks like I've gotta think some more about startin' a general merchandise store of my own in Granite City. . . . An' after this I may have to let folks sell their own cows."

"Greer!" Sheriff Kessler thundered it. "If you don't dry up, I'll report you to the judge; by God, I will!"

Hoss spun on his stool, grinning sheepishly. "How's that? Oh-h-h, I musta bin thinkin' out loud. What'd I say? Don't see how it coulda bin anything affectin' the frame-up against Bill Dunkirk, Blant. I wasn't even thinkin' thataway. . . ."

The red-faced sheriff came up, raging. "You're through, all of you," he snapped at the jurymen. "Anyhow, it's all you get. I'm damned if I'll take the responsibility of stuffin' your ears against the prattlin' of this old fool. Get goin; you've got a job to do."

They filed out before him, some very sober faced, others grinning. And Hoss smiled to himself that the serious ones were those whose toes he had threatened to step on.

HIS weariness dissipated and his appetite whetted by excitement, Old Hoss ate with relish. Then, having settled for the meal, he went outside to find the street all but deserted. A crowd, milling

about the door of the court house, was proof enough that a lot of things fateful to this range hung upon the jury's verdict.

Hoss strolled down, made himself part of that crowd, elbowing his way forward until he could look through the door at the crowded court room.

Tension gripped that gathering. A low buzz of talk persisted, with everyone riveting his gaze on the jury room door. And through that low undertone came the turmoil of snarling conflict, as the jury argued.

Everyone expected a quick conviction, and puzzlement was plain on every face when a half hour went by without a verdict. An hour. The court bailiff dozed in his chair by the jury room door. The crowd fell silent, straining ears for some hint as to how the battle went.

At a quarter after three a violent disturbance broke out among the talesmen with the roars of angry men, and the crash of a chair being overturned. The bailiff bounced to his feet and tried the door. It was locked and—in his hurry—the man fumbled the key.

Sheriff Cramer came up, grim-faced, to assist him. Things had quieted when they threw the door open. But they did not enter. Mike Meagher, heavy shouldered and glowering, stood planted before them, barring their way. Blood trickled from one nostril and one eye was changing color.

"What the hell you two want?" he demanded truculently.

"What's goin' on in here?" countered the sheriff. "Can't you twelve come to no agreement without stagin' a free-for-all?"

"No!" The saloonman thundered it. "We won't never get a verdict if nitwits like you keep bustin' in on us. Get to hell outa here and let us alone."

Sheepishly, the pair locked the door and resumed their seats. And for some time, silence held the crowd. What could be happening in there? Dunkirk was a rustler. What room was there for argument—and combat?

At four-thirty the judge came from his chambers, to convene court and then adjourn it. Another ruckus was under way in the jury room. The judge ordered a report from the jury, and the bailiff was fitting his key in the lock when there was a strident pounding on the panel. Then out they came, twelve of Bill Dunkirk's peers.

All showed the rigors of their hours of deliberation; at least half wore badges of physical violence. One had to be assisted to his seat in the box. Wade Snyder, the foreman, stood up to face the judge, dabbing at a split lip with a blood-stained handkerchief.

The judge said: "Has the jury arrived at a verdict?"

"We have, Your Honor."

"You may read that verdict."

"We find the defendant, William Dunkirk . . .not guilty!" said Snyder gravely.

CHAPTER THREE

War-Clouds Gather

SAVE for Old Hoss, it stunned everyone, even the judge. A momentary hush gripped courtroom and street, then a yell of astonished joy swept nesters and small cowmen; a hoarse roar of disapproval from the men of the big outfits across the aisle.

For a while bedlam reigned, everyone standing to voice his feelings; the bailiff bellowing threats to clear the hall; the judge beating the bench with his gavel. Slowly, order came, then a respectful silence. Bill Dunkirk sat beside his lawyer, his head lifted joyously, his wife smiling beside him.

The judge bent a lowering glance upon the jurymen. "I am shocked," he intoned

gravely. "Flabbergasted! You men have gone contrariwise to all the evidence. You have profaned the majesty of the American jury system. In thus defeating the ends of justice, you have earned the censure and scorn of all right-thinking citizens. I regret that you leave me no choice but to free the defendant and close the case. You are dismissed, gentlemen, to face your neighbors. Court adjourned."

With stiff alacrity, those of the large outfits quit the courtroom, led by Shiloh Grimes, Torvo Tillotson and the Santell Brothers. Bleak-faced, tight-lipped and grimly silent, they moved along the walk in a threatening body, to vanish in Meagher's Saloon.

The little cowmen came out, capering with joy, all talking at once as they angled across the street toward the Cherokee Bar.

NO ONE took notice of Hoss Greer, flattened against the front and grinning like the cat that has eaten the canary. But when the dejected, battered jurymen came out, Mike Meagher spotted him, voiced an inarticulate snarl and faced away. The rest glared, then each hurried away to his respective business.

Not until then did Hoss relinquish his fixed smile and reënter the courtroom. Just inside the door, he met Sheriff Cramer, with Bill Dunkirk and Mary just behind him.

"This is your doing, you nosey old meddler," the lawman raged. "You influenced that jury, Greer, with your damned threats to boycott 'em in a business way. You oughta be hung, that's what! You're a worse criminal than Dunkirk, for all his rustlin'!"

"That," said Hoss friendlessly, "remains for the court to prove next time this young rustlin' son is tried." His eyes flicked to Bill Dunkirk and his face twisted with a grimace of distate. "Better get the cuffs on him, Blant."

Dunkirk stared at him, his face paling, his eyes flooded with disbelief.

"Mister Greer!" Mary's protest tore out in a sob.

"What you mean, Hoss?" The sheriff eyed him dourly. "I thought—"

"Get him into the jailhouse!" rapped the old cowman unpleasantly. "I'll go along an' swear out the complaint."

"For what?" demanded Cramer, frowning.

"For rustlin' my cattle, Blant," Hoss explained smoothly.

"Tell me about it," muttered the lawman. "What's the facts?"

"Which you'll learn all about when he comes to trial," snapped Hoss. "You ain't hearin' the case, Blant. You're only the sheriff, an' I'm askin' you to jail this man."

The sheriff shrugged, turned to lay his fingers into Bill Dunkirk's arm. "You heard him, Dunkirk. Come along. Once a man goes bad, there ain't no caution in him, looks like. You had enough luck today for any ten men; it can't happen again. Get goin', feller."

They walked down to the jail together, Bill Dunkirk hopelessly depressed, Mary clinging to him. The sheriff kept a puzzled glance on poker-faced Hoss Greer, as if unable to shed the thought that there was something he had missed about this. Hoss remained only to sign the complaint and see Dunkirk safely locked up. Then he turned to the sheriff.

To Blant Cramer he gave a pointed warning. "A lot of folks are pretty sore about Dunkirk goin' free," he muttered. "An' a few may drink too much likker an' dream up a jailbreak." He pointed to a rack of rifles and scatterguns. "With tools like them, no man or mob of men can crash a jail like this. So, if anything like that happens, I'll hold you to a strict settlement. You savvy?" He flashed his wintry little smile.

The sheriff's eyes were popping. "I savvy," he choked.

"Good! An' see that you don't say nothin' about this new charge against Bill Dunkirk, you understand? I'll do all the talkin' about that, as needs be. See you later."

On the street again, Hoss found the walks all but deserted. But, more interesting to him, the small ranchers in the Cherokee Bar were raising an unending hullabaloo. Against it, the ominous silence of the Mustang Saloon contrasted sharply. For a moment Old Hoss weighed that comparison, decided to enter the Cherokee then changed his mind and walked into Mike Meagher's place, stronghold of the big ranchers.

THE place was jammed with riders of the big outfits, gathered in low-talking knots. Along the rear of the bar, the ranch owners stood with their drinks, with Shiloh Grimes dominating the scene. Behind the bar, bulky, red-faced Mike Meagher looked strangely uncomfortable as he tried to explain the unexpected action of the jury.

Silence fell as Hoss entered. Every eye was on him as he bowlegged over to join his erstwhile friends, sullenly condemning eyes filled with contempt. Hoss didn't turn a hair in the face of that disrespect, taking the bottle from Mike Meagher, pouring and gulping a drink.

"There's nothing in the world so mizzable," he said, as if to himself, "as a poor loser!"

"Or a man who turns on his friends," added Torvo Tillotson. "An' to think we was hoping you'd come over for the trial, Hoss, never dreamin' you'd cut our throats."

"Only a fool squeals before he's hurt, Torvo. I've cut nobody's throat, as you'll see when you get the skunk-oil cleared out of the air." His chill glance went to Shiloh Grimes, and the man blinked.

"You leave it no secret that you hate me, Greer," the Flying U boss said. "And I'm content to have it thataway, the way you've acted in this. Mebby if we'd had any idea you could have bought Judge Walcott. . . ."

"I hate to soil Mike's floor," broke in Hoss crisply, "but I'll kill you, Grimes, unless you take that back!"

"Hold on, Hoss!" Tim Mears, once a soldier and a judge of man-passion, leaped to Greer, caught his arm. "Take it easy, pardner. Shiloh was just runnin' off at the head an'—"

"Let him say it!" interrupted Hoss. "You boys keep out of it."

"Well. . . . I'll take that back," hedged Grimes, red faced. "Mebby I did talk out of turn about something I believe but can't prove. And, if it's any compliment to you, Greer, I'm taking your advice. Seein' that justice and established law has failed, I'm taking care of my own rustling troubles from here out."

"Such as how?" demanded Hoss in a strangely soft voice.

Instead of answering him directly, Shiloh Grimes turned his eyes toward a compact body of cowboys in one corner of the long room.

"Wichita!" he shouted, "split up your boys and set a guard on every road leading out of Granite City. When Bill Dunkirk comes heading for home, grab him and send me word. Some folks here have been lulled into believing that cottonwood trees don't bear fruit. I aim to show 'em their mistake."

Hoss smiled thinly. "I accept yore apology, Grimes. An' of course I haven't any desire to interfere with your fun. But don't forget that other folks know the cottonwoods bear fruit, but they consider it poison. Like deadly nightshade, Grimes."

He turned away and walked from the saloon, his spurs clanking like a tocsin, as they watched him leave.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Shirt-Tail Gunmen

THE sun had set when Hoss reached the street and a pungent, earthy coolness came filtering in from the range on the freshening breeze. The cowman took off his hat to savor it as he crossed the street to the stable, paused at one side of the arched doorway and turned to regard the street. The time-worn old hostler came up to stand beside him, tobacco juice making twin rivers down his chin, his sparse hair stirred by the evening breeze.

"Nice, ain't it," he murmured. "Nicest time of the day, Hoss. Sorta brings peace to a feller's soul. Kinda glad Dunkirk's turned loose, ain't you? Mighty surprisin' though, after what I heard about the evidence ag'in' him."

"Life's full of surprises, Bourbon. Like the way them boys is hurryin' to get outa town, for instance."

The stableman grunted, watching the outflow of cowboys pour from the Mustang, fork their ponies, mill a moment and then spur away to cover the various outlets from Granite City. Hoss posted the reflection that Wichita Weeks and two of his toughest cases took the north road, leading to Bill Dunkirk's Rocking MD. He knew the Flying U foreman as a man jealous of his gun-rep.

"Funny goin's-on," muttered Bourbon Bill, the hostler. "Now where do you reckon them boys is goin', Hoss?"

"Lookin' to stage a cottonwood prance, Bourbon."

"Cripes!" The old barn man whirled on him, startled. "You—you mean Dunkirk?" Are they . . .?"

"Bourbon," Hoss laid a hand on his bony shoulder, "I knowed that would happen an' had Dunkirk locked up, for safe keepin'. When Grimes finds that out, he may decide the jail needs workin' over. How'd you like to strop on them old cutters of yores?"

The barn man grinned, his jaws speeding their tempo. "Holy cow, Hoss!" He ran his gnarled fingers up and down his levis. "It's bin a long time since. . . ."

He spun about, darted into the office and came out with twin gunbelts crossed at his skinny middle. The vacuous smile was gone from his face and his shoulders seemed straighter. His long nose jutted toward Hoss.

"You ain't one to fool with a man like me, Greer," he said hoarsely. "What's in the wind?"

"Poke over to the jailhouse, Bourbon, an' tell the sheriff I sent you. Plant yoreself there an' warm up them irons if anybody comes figgerin' on taking Dunkirk out. You savvy?"

"Do I? I never thought I'd see the day again when—"

He was gone, his stable forgotten, his run-over boots beating a swift tattoo on the walk.

Hoss smiled after him, hitched up his gun-belt and walked down to the Cherokee Bar.

THE place was a madhouse, the small ranchers celebrating their victory with far too much whiskey for their own good. Hoss' entry was hailed with delight, and numbers of men swooped down on him, clamoring to buy the drinks. There was no way they could have even guessed his place in the verdict, but the mere fact that he was Bill Dunkirk's good friend was enough.

"No, boys," he refused, when he had brought silence. "There may be work to do tonight, and whiskey and good shootin' don't mix."

"Good shootin'?" They stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Grimes don't accept the verdict," Hoss told them. "He's figgerin' on havin' Bill strung up."

"The hell he is." Wade Sherfee, a burly nester running cattle in the dry end of the Apache Hills, stood forth. "I reckon we'll have something to say about that, Mister Greer. If there's any hangin' here tonight, it won't be Bill danglin'. Boys, let's cross the street an' take to them high-an'-mighty snakes."

"Half of you will die," Hoss pointed out, "an' the seeds of a bloody war will be sowed. It's my guess there ain't one of you got anything against an outfit in this valley, except the Flying U. That right?"

"Grimes speaks for all the rest," growled Sherfee.

"That's because he's pulled the wool over their eyes," Hoss argued. "Ain't one of the others but wants to be right, an' will. As far as Grimes is concerned, I'm the one to bring the gospel to him."

"What you want us to do?" spoke up one.

Hoss glanced at the clock ticking on the backbar. "Wait here," he told them, "for another half hour. Then go down to the jail and meet Dunkirk. Him an' his woman will be ready to go home by then. Throw a ring of guns around his buckboard an' ride out to his place with him. Some of you stay with them folks till daylight. After that, I don't reckon there'll be no more trouble."

They promised, watched him leave.

Darkness was enveloping the town when Hoss hit the street. His head pounded and he was suddenly conscious of weariness and hunger. He turned into the restaurant, had a piece of pie and two cups of hot, black coffee. Feeling renewed, he walked over to the jail.

Bourbon Bill sat there grinning like an imp, caressing the worn butts of his beloved pistols. Blant Cramer glowered angrily at him from across his desk.

"Greer," he shouted, when Hoss popped in. "I won't stand for this crazy old coot campin' in here, slingin' half-made threats at me. I won't stand it, you hear me?"

"Why don't you fire him out?" grinned Hoss. "Or ain't it healthy? I can't be bothered. Bourbon, go over to the stable an' fetch the Dunkirk buckboard."

"Hold on, Greer!" The sheriff was up, leveling his finger. "You've swore out a warrant for that gent an' he ain't goin' nowhere. You or no other man's gonna run my business."

Bourbon Bill cackled and, as Hoss jerked his head, scuttled outside.

Hoss said: "Steady, Sheriff. I'm withdrawing my complaint. I find I was wrong. . . ."

"I get it!" Cramer was furious. "You signed that complaint so's I'd jail Dunkirk an' keep him safe from Grimes. You can't. . . ."

"But I can," insisted Hoss. "You're right; that's just what I done. Now shut up that caterwaulin' an' trot him out."

The outraged lawman tried to argue, but Hoss didn't let him get far. After while the buckboard drove up to the rack, Bourbon at the ribbons. And, moments later, the small ranch owners came to the jail in a body. Cramer gave in. Hoss grinned at the nesters, now cold sober in the face of trouble.

"Give me fifteen minutes, boys," he asked. "Then put Dunkirk and his wife in the rig and see 'em home by the north road. If Kessler balks, lock him in one of his nice cells."

Once more he was on the street, heading for the stable. He saddled and rode through the gathering darkness, heading north. His senses were keenly alert.

WITHIN the first mile, where the road passed through a tall growth of mesquite, figures stirred in the gloom ahead. Three horsemen moved out to intercept them. "Haul up!" came the gruff challenge. "Who is it, an' where you goin', so lazy-like?"

Horsemen came out to intercept him. . . .

"It's Greer," answered Hoss, obeying instantly. "I'm goin' to my Packsaddle spread. Any particular reason why I should be in a hurry?"

They approached cautiously. The tall one, in the center, was easily recognizable as Wichita, Flying U foreman.

"Oh, it's Greer, boys," he sneered. "The feller who's stunk up with Dunkirk's skunk-oil. An' he wants to know why he should be in a hurry. Think of any reason?"

"Strikes me he orta be foggin' his tail outa here," chuckled one. "If he's got whole hide ideas, the low-down rustler-lover! Way I see it, Shiloh's gonna lump off the nits with the lice, before he's through. Good nesters are dead nesters. An' if a man ain't ag'in' the critters, he's one of them."

They passed a lot of smart talk, all for Hoss' benefit. Foot by foot, they edged their ponies forward, until they were right before him, until Hoss could follow the play of their lips. He sat slumped in the saddle, a little old man, alone and frightened as they licked their chops.

That's why they were caught completely off guard when he suddenly whipped out his gun and threw down on them.

"Up with them dewclaws, you buzzards!" he snapped. "Sudden, or by hell—"

Wichita swore, drove for his gun. Orange flame spurted from Hoss's weapon and the big foreman cried out, shooting up a hand that dripped blood.

"Another break like that," hissed Hoss, "an' I'll plant one under yore wishbone, big feller. Now get down, all three of you!"

They obeyed, their hands held high. Hoss swung down to face them, lifted their pistols and tossed them into the deep brush. "Take off your boots!" he ordered.

"What—what you fixin' to do?" Wichita's voice was pleading.

"That's what I could have asked you," rapped Hoss, "when you were lording it over me. I didn't an' don't you. Now jerk off them pants!" He menaced them with his gun and they obeyed him.

Moments later, he was in the saddle, driving them across the flats in their sock-feet.

MEN of Granite City still talk of the time Old Hoss Greer hazed those three gunmen down the dusty street, their shirt tails flapping, their long flannels flapping about their legs. The Dunkirk rig, with its nester escort, was gone. But Bourbon Bill stood before the jail, looking lonely, baffled and a little ludicrous with his two big guns.

His eyes popped at sight of Hoss and his prisoners. Then he gave a war whoop that drew patrons from the smaller saloons. A vast laugh arose and men followed along. Someone stuck his head out of the Mustang Saloon, ducked swiftly inside. But before there could be any outpouring, Hoss steered the three pleading Flying U men through the swinging

doors, through the rift in the grinning patrons and so to a halt before apoplectic Shiloh Grimes.

Save for the racket of new arrivals through the swing doors, silence held the Mustang barroom. The old cowman didn't so much as glance at Grimes, nor at the friends and neighbors who stood with the man. He held his glance on his three captives, who were slowly gaining courage now that they were with their boss.

"Turn around!" he commanded. "Now join hands in a circle."

"Go to hell!" snarled Wichita.

Hoss drove two swift shots into the floor by his feet. White-faced, the three linked hands.

"Now dance!" Hoss ordered. "Ring-around-the-rosey, savvy? Circle, damn you! An' sing! Sing London Bridge Is Falling Down.

"Don't know it," whined one.

"I'll start you off," barked Hoss, and his cracked voice lifted: "London bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down; London bridge is falling down, my fair lady. Sing, blast yore hides, or I'll pare off yore toes!"

He plowed another shot into the floor, and they sang discordantly. They capered as they swung the circle in their baggy drawers. The saloon roared with laughter, even Tillotson, Mears, the Santell Brothers and the other large ranch owners joining.

"Sing, you sinners!" Hoss roared. "Dance like you meant it! Swing yore pardners. Do-see-do! Stir dust, you coyotes! Lift yore knees an' beat the floor. Faster! That's enough! Cripes, you're awkward as sand turtles." And as they willingly broke apart and stood there, breathing hard, Hoss fixed his eyes on fuming Shiloh Grimes.

The laughter died away and Grimes burst into a sputtering roar. "What's the meaning of this horse play, Greer? What do you mean, humiliating my men like this?"

"I'm glad you admit they're yours," said Hoss very quietly. "It places responsibility where it belongs. The buzzards didn't know me no better than you do. They stopped me on the north road, amused themselves humiliatin' me, not to mention warning me to raise a tall dust getting off my own range. So, to teach them an' you a lesson, I'm fetchin' 'em in an' dumpin' 'em into your lap."

GRIMES' lips were white and his eyes glinted murderously as he glared at the three. "You fools!" he gritted, savagely. "You crazy damned fools! Maybe you think I talk to hear myself. I told you to wait out there and pick up Dunkirk. Instead, you take time out to stop Greer and get tangled in your own loops. That will cost you, you hear? In the meantime, I suppose Dunkirk has slipped through."

"Right!" said Hoss. "I'm happy to tell you, Grimes, that Bill Dunkirk is safe at home with his wife."

The Flying U boss shook his wide shoulders. "That's all I want to know," he growled, hitching his gun. "I've heard about you jailing him, Greer, in order to save his skin. But it won't work. Who's with me to go out and snake that rustler from his den?"

There was instant, favorable response from a score of wild young cowboys of the various big outfits, whose only sin was love of adventure and excitement.

Old Hoss paid them not the slightest heed. He had finished jacking out the empties and reloading his piece. He held it now in the flat of his hand, carelessly, while he stared intently at Grimes.

"I hate to be unpleasant, Grimes," he murmured. "But I suggest you stay here, in the Mustang."

It was the way he said it, more than what he said, that brought the instant

strung stillness to the place. Grimes gave one look into Hoss' eyes and gulped.

For a full sixty seconds not a man moved or spoke.

CHAPTER FIVE

Gun-Verdict

SHILOH GRIMES was first to break the hush. With an astonished oath, he dropped his hand to his gun, snatching it away instantly as Old Hoss' mild blue eyes changed to blizzard ice. "You—you threatening me, Greer?" he asked tightly.

"Not the way you think, Grimes. But I'd like to know where you are when that U. S. marshal gets here. Marshals are mighty busy men, feller, and he might not want to go chasing you over the hills of the Flying U."

"Marshal? Chasing me?" Grimes was suddenly gray-faced, shaken. "You talk like a crazy man, Greer! What have I done to fear a marshal? Uncle Sam ain't interested in a man who protects himself from cow-thieves."

"Unless," added Hoss drily, "that man had broke some federal law beforehand."

"What law?" Grimes bit at it. "What you trying to do, Greer? Poison my good friends against me?"

"Good Lord, no!" Hoss thoughtfully dropped his gun into leather. "I'm tryin' to get you to stay here until that marshal arrives. He should be here sometime tonight. Fact is, I'm here to see that you do stay, to tell the law all about that dim past you never talk about. You got plenty time to be thinkin' up the answers, Grimes, but you better stick around."

"I'll be around when I'm wanted," snarled Grimes. "But you've bit off too much, Greer, when you try to hold me, here or any place else." His self-possession was returning. And, with it, his will to destroy Bill Dunkirk. "Come on, boys! Who follows me to the Rocking MD?"

"Before you all answer at once," Hoss warned them, "think over what you're up against?"

"What's that?" demanded Torvo Tillotson.

"For one thing," said the old cowman, "a dozen nester rifles planted around Dunkirk's house. That's just half of it?"

"What else?" asked Grimes, his eyes slitted.

"I taken a leaf outa yore book," confessed Hoss, without regard for the truth. "If you could set guards on the road to hold a gent here, why can't I? An' remember, I've got a mighty plucky outfit ridin' for me on the Packsaddle."

Passion of fear laid its pallor on Grimes again. "That, eh?" He spat, turned to the bar. "Whiskey, Mike," he ground out. "Something strong to wash the taste of this man out of my mouth. If tonight don't prove nothing else, men, it shows you the stripe of this Greer."

He took the bottle, carefully poured a drink. Lifting it in his left hand, he spun about, his face unreadable. "Here's to a polecat that makes his own laws," he said, huskily. "A gent who plays both ends from the middle—"

The glass slid from his fingers and his gun was coming out.

IT MUST have seemed to the watchers that cold murder was about to be done, that Hoss Greer's rugged career was finished. Nor was it given to one of them to observe the details of Hoss' legendary draw.

One moment he stood planted there, smiling patiently at Grimes' insult, easy prey for the gun that slid so smoothly from the Flying U boss' holster. The next moment he had shifted, and the crash of his weapon was being echoed back from the walls.

Grimes' six-shooter thudded against the floor and he stood stupidly trying to stem the sudden gush of blood at his

middle. Then he fell to the sawdust and was still.

Their eyes went from the fallen man to Hoss. The cowman stood as he had stood only a second before, a thin wisp of smoke curling before his face and no weapon in his hand. His eyes were blazing and there was the hint of a curl to his lip as he looked at the fallen man and said, softly:

"Die, you lousy crook! Stretch out an' die, thereby savin' the lives of a lot of better men." His glance shifted, ran along the shocked cowmen at the bar. "Like him well enough to play his cards?" he asked.

Torvo Tillotson's voice shook. "You know us, Hoss. Ain't a cowman in this valley would have listened to him if—if he'd knowed Grimes was a crook. What's he guilty of? An' how did you ferret it out?"

Hoss shook his head, smiling thinly. "I've got no more idea what he's did than you boys have. But I guessed—an' rightly too—that anybody comin' in here to start a war amongst neighbors who have lived at peace must be all bad—from his beginnings. He proved that, when he tried to rub me out. What's the matter with you fellers? You know the signs of a range-grabber as well as I do, yet you let him go on an' on, usin' you against the nesters until he was ready to turn you against one another. Hell, I orta pistol-whip some sense into your thick heads!"

As if utterly disgusted, he turned away from his gulping neighbors, his spurs clanking as he moved toward the door.

Tim Mears called after him, "Wait a minute, Hoss. Confessin' that we've bin fools won't hurt us none. Won't you hear our side . . .?"

"I'm in a hurry," Hoss flung back. "It'll have to wait."

"Hey, where you goin'?" called Torvo Tillotson.

"Out to the Packsaddle, to see boys too busy even to know there was a range war bein' cooked up."

"Your boys, Hoss? I thought you said . . ."

Hoss paused at the door, turned scornful eyes back. "That illustrates my point perfect," he said sternly. "You gents have got so you believe everything you hear. You sure are slippin'."

Then the doors had flapped behind him and he was bowlegging through the night for his horse.

The Rocking MD, he considered, might be a better bet than the Packsaddle. Young Bill and the nesters would be glad to learn that the Negrito Valley trouble was over. And Mary—well, Mary made biscuits, golden as nuggets, and twice as valuable!

THE END

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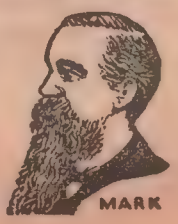

By
E. B. MANN

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A complete short novel of a two-way cattle-steal

A GREEN HAND HITS THE OWLHOOT

Because Johnny Fuzell, embittered young poverty rancher, hired on Jeff Slater's big spread, his hard-pressed neighbors branded him traitor. But Johnny figured that steady grub and fighting pay would more than make up for such an empty, thankless thing as cowman loyalty!

CHAPTER ONE

Gunman—For Hire!

JOHNNY FUZELL was the first man to leave the meeting of Dona Anna County taxpayers in the County courtroom that morning, so Johnny was the first man in Mesilla to see the stranger whose coming was to loose the storm over the Dona Anna range.

Train's gun targetted the man who had just shot. . . .

Not that Johnny noticed the man particularly. Johnny was in no mood that morning to notice anything less diverting than mayhem! Johnny was sore!

Jeff Slater, following him out of the courtroom, was well aware of Johnny's anger and the knowledge pleased him. He laid a hand on Johnny's shoulder.

"They rode you pretty hard didn't they, kid? Especially Jaynes . . . Funny, too, you and Mary bein' the way you are about each other."

"Cut it, Jeff." Johnny shook Slater's hand off his shoulder. Across the street a man on a great ugly buckskin gelding had just reined up to the hitching rail, and Johnny watched the man swing down from the saddle. He was a big hombre, long legged and broad shouldered, yet he handled himself with the grace of a dancer. That was all Johnny noticed about him at the moment; that, and the two guns draped across the stranger's hips.

"Callin' you a traitor! And just because you had sense enough to see that small-scale ranchin' is a losin' game!" Jeff Slater's voice held a sympathetic anger.

"Lettin' your spread go and takin' a job with me was the smartest thing you ever did, Johnny, and don't you let 'em tell you different!"

"Maybe. Or maybe I was a fool to let you talk me into it." Johnny wheeled abruptly, flinging his answer with a sudden violence. "Tell me the truth, Jeff. Why were you so anxious to hire me? Was it for my guns?"

The question jolted Slater a little. He needed a moment to choose his answer. "Your guns? Hell, use your head, Johnny! Do I need your guns?"

No! It was as simple as that! Guns were Johnny's life-long love, and there were those who said he was fast. Mary Jaynes, Angus Jayne's daughter, had suggested that Slater had hired him for that reason.

But Slater was boss of the Diamond, and the Diamond was one of the Sinclair Cattle Company ranches; one of the biggest outfits in the business. Slater would hire no untried gunman—as a gunman! Slater could hire the best! Could, and did! Men like Cluff and Eldridge; men like Red Henry and Bud Nevers.

THE courtroom door slammed crisply and Angus Jaynes stood just back of Slater, his feet wide, his big bearded head thrust forward a little. He was an old man and the hair under his battered hat was silvery, but he was burly. And dangerous.

"I got just one more thing to say to you, Johnny." Jayne's voice was angry. "Keep out o' my sight! I got no use for cow-thieves, nor for smart kids that turn tail on their friends to work for cow-thieves! And that goes for Mary, too. You keep away from her, sabe? Keep off my land! If I ever catch you shinin' up to Mary again—"

Jeff Slater's voice cut in, sneering and ugly. "What'll you do, Pop?"

The sudden tension pulled Johnny's nerves taut. He heard the stranger's boots hit the steps behind him and come up slowly. The courtroom door opened again and Bill Adams, Jaynes' friend and neighbor, stood in the opening, his keen eyes taking in the scene before him.

Angus Jaynes' head swung slowly, like that of an old bull, badgered and at bay. His angry gaze touched Slater for a moment, then rested still unfriendly and appraising, on the stranger. Jaynes' head turned further then, and Johnny followed his gaze.

Wils Eldridge and Jack Cluff, top gunmen in Slater's crew, came forward, not talking. Johnny saw Eldridge eye the stranger briefly and it seemed to Johnny that something like recognition gleamed for a moment in Eldridge's shrewd glance. Later, he thought he must have just imagined that.

Jaynes said thickly, "Brave man ain't you, Slater, tryin' to pick a fight with me, with Cluff, Eldridge—and this new man backin' you? I reckon he's another one o' your hired killers! It won't work, Slater. I ain't even heeled."

He lurched forward, shouldering past Slater, and down the steps. His buckboard stood at the rack there and Jaynes jerked the tie-rope loose as he passed it. He climbed up into the seat, stepping over the big double-barreled shotgun that slanted down against the dashboard.

Pop, eh? They figured he was old; old and toothless, but by God, he'd show 'em! A ten-gauge gun could even a lot of odds, especially against men huddled together like a covey of quail. . . .

He swung his team away from the rail and checked them; stood up swiftly. The gun came up with him, his gnarled hand covering its hammers and the triggers in one enveloping, familiar grip.

"Slater!" The old man's bark was a challenge.

Slater wheeled swiftly to face him, and then, a step to Slater's left, Johnny

Fuzell went suddenly rigid. At Johnny's elbow, the stranger too had turned. Beyond Slater, Jack Cluff and Wils Eldridge spun sharply, Eldridge's big body cutting Cluff from Johnny's vision.

"I'm heeled now." Jaynes' voice was low and deadly. "With the shotgun pointin' down along my leg like this, I figure I'm givin' you an even break—or better. So make your play, damn you! I'm sick o' talk! This way, maybe we'll get somethin' settled!"

Johnny gasped harshly. It was better than an even break; much better, for Slater could draw and shoot before Horn could get the shotgun leveled!

Slater said slowly, "Don't be a fool, Angus."

Even as he spoke, Slater's eyes under the shadow of his hat-brim flicked left and right, weighing the possibilities. Johnny saw that; wondered if Jaynes saw it.

"Get him, Johnny!" Slater's voice cracked, sudden and startling. His left hand jerked out away from his body in Johnny's direction, pointing his words. And Slater's right hand snaked for his gun.

JOHNNY saw that; knew that Slater's words and Slater's gesture were a trick to throw Jaynes' attention away from Slater's right hand.

A heavy blow hit Johnny hard between the shoulders and flung him forward. His shoulder hit Slater solidly in the short-ribs and the two of them sprawled down together. As they fell, two shots cracked out, followed swiftly by the heavy reverberating boom of Angus Jaynes' shotgun.

Johnny winced instinctively, and wondered how Angus could possibly have missed at this distance! Then something hit him stunningly just back of the right ear and the rest was a blur; a blur through which he heard dimly the startled snort of a horse and the rattle of wheels and the excited hubbub of voices. One of the voices, he knew, was Slater's. Slater was cursing him—Johnny—because Johnny had spoiled his draw.

He couldn't have been out, he thought, more than a few seconds. Jack Cluff was kneeling beside him and Wils Eldridge was helping Slater to his feet again. Johnny flung off Cluff's hand and sat up.

It was the stranger who had hit him. He knew that much; had known it even as he collided with Slater. No one else had been within hitting distance. . . . The second blow, the one that had caught him back of the ear, had been an accident, part of the fall.

He saw instantly why Jaynes' shot had missed. The team had lunged, flinging the old man off balance and back across the buckboard seat. The shotgun lay on top of him, its muzzle to the sky, still smoking.

The team had halted now, checked inside their first half-dozen steps by the tangle of the reins in a wheel. But the near horse was dancing crazily, and Johnny saw the wet gleam of blood trickling down the beast's hind leg; blood from a shallow bullet wound a few inches below the animal's crupper.

Johnny's head turned swiftly. The stranger stood quite motionless, his posture easy and relaxed. But there was a gun in the stranger's right hand and Johnny saw the wisp of smoke clinging to that gun's muzzle.

Johnny stared for an instant, then stood up slowly. It seemed incredible that the man could have planted that blow between Johnny's shoulders, drawn a gun and fired that exquisitely aimed shot, all in the split second that had been given him. Yet there was no other answer!

"And I," Johnny muttered dazedly, "thought I was fast!"

Men were pouring out of the courtroom now, milling around them, the excited

babble of their voices making an incoherent bedlam. A girl came flashing out of Lindstrom's store, running arrow-straight to Jaynes' buckboard. It was Mary.

The stranger's voice was low and unstressed, yet it silenced the clamor around him. "I reckon," he said, "that I owe everybody concerned an apology." He spoke slowly, as if there were something here that vaguely puzzled him. "Trouble was, shotguns, I've noticed, ain't particular who they hit. And—I was in the line of fire."

He glanced at Johnny then, and smiled. There was something oddly contagious about that smile; something attractive and friendly. Johnny's own lips twisted a little in sympathy.

"Only way I could see to deflect that charge of buckshot was to stampede the team. That meant giving the old man a bad break on the shoot-out, so—I had to do somethin' about *him*, too." He tipped his head toward Slater.

He glanced at Johnny then, and grinned again. "I figured he couldn't draw much with you hangin' on to him. . . . But the thing that bothers me now is—"

A WOMAN'S thin scream cut off his words and the sound jerked Johnny's gaze back to the buckboard. Mary Jaynes was on the buckboard step, her arms reaching up across Angus Jaynes' sprawled body. It was odd, Johnny thought, swiftly, that Angus had not moved. The fall must have hurt him . . .

And then his mind grasped Mary's words: "He's dead!"

He was running then, leading the sudden surge of men toward the buckboard. Across the street, three men burst out of an open doorway and Johnny saw with quick relief that they were Sheriff Billy Marsh and two of his deputies. Then he was reaching for Mary, tugging at her, feeling her struggle against him. . . .

It was minutes before the thing regained reality to Johnny's mind. Angus was dead, all right. He knew that as soon as he saw the spreading stain on the front of Jaynes' shirt. He had been shot.

Bill Adams' voice pulled Johnny back to what was happening around him: "—then Angus climbed into his buckboard. I thought it was all over then, but Angus stood up all of a sudden, bringin' the shotgun up with him. When Slater yelled, 'Get him, Johnny!' I seen Jaynes' eyes switch over to Johnny—and Johnny went for his gun."

"So!" The sheriff's grim monosyllable halted Adams' testimony. "So you went for your gun, eh, Johnny?"

"No! I—"

Johnny's voice broke oddly, leaving that one word to stand alone. Maybe—it was true! Maybe he had gone for his gun! Startled, seeing Jaynes' gun swinging toward him, maybe he had! It would be natural; a natural product of his endless hours of practice. . . . But he couldn't have drawn and fired that gun! Not without knowing it!

Sheriff Marsh's voice went on implacably. "Angus rode you pretty hard, I hear, at the meetin." Then he came out and ordered you to keep clear of his daughter. So you killed him!"

"*No!* No, I *didn't!*" Johnny's voice was desperate. "I may've started for my gun because I was startled. But I never fired!"

The sheriff grunted. His big hand shot out, ripping Johnny's gun out of its holster. He glanced at it, sniffed, and dumped the contents of the cylinder out into his palm.

"Never fired, eh? The gun's still hot! And there's an empty shell under the hammer! Stop lyin', Johnny! You killed him!"

It was, Johnny thought, like a crazy nightmare! Things were happening that couldn't happen!

He leaned forward, staring. The empty shell was there, all right. And he could smell the acrid taint of recently burned powder from the gun's muzzle. But there was something else. . . .

His voice seemed, even to himself, to come from a far distance. "But that—that's not my gun!"

Sheriff Marsh snorted. "Not your—? Didn't I just snatch it out of your holster?

"Yes, but it's not my gun! it's not mine, I tell you! My gun had a nick on the edge of the loading gate. And it had my name scratched on the under side of one of the butt-plates. You take the butt-plates of that gun—"

"—And we won't find your name there!" The sheriff nodded. "Sure! But all we got is your word that *any* gun ever had your name there! . . . I've heard you preach plenty times that you wouldn't pack any gun but a Smith and Wesson. This is a Smith and Wesson. And whether it's your gun or not, it's the one you was wearin'!"

He turned, leaving Johnny under the unfriendly scrutiny of his two deputies. "You, stranger; you was in on this too, I hear. Who are you?"

CHAPTER TWO

Cattle Thieves' Honor

FAR to the eastward the engine on the west-bound freight flung its long wail of warning toward the Mesilla station. The stranger's lips curved slightly. "Why, call me—Train," he said softly. "Jim Train . . . Okay?"

Marsh scowled at him. He caught the connection, all right, and snorted. "One o' these guys that change names to match whatever shirt they're wearin', eh? I can usually find right names for guys like that—on 'wanted' posters! All right, Train, *your* gun's been fired, too. Or are you fixin' to claim it ain't yours?"

Train shrugged. "It's my gun, and I fired it. It hit what I aimed at, too. Which was the horse."

Marsh grunted. "That's as may be. There was two shots fired, not countin' the shotgun. One of 'em grooved the horse and one of 'em killed Jaynes. Your gun's a Colt. The slug that killed Jaynes is still in him . . . You sabe what I'm drivin' at?"

Train nodded. "Sure. You're thinkin' that the rifling in a Colt barrel is different from that in a Smith and Wesson. A Colt marks a slug with six narrow grooves, slantin' from right to left as you look toward the point of the bullet. A Smith and Wesson cuts five grooves, wide ones, slantin' from left to right So when you get the slug out of Jaynes' body—"

"—I'll know who killed him!" Marsh said grimly. "Until then, you and Johnny will oblige me by walkin' over to the jail with me. The doc's workin' on Jaynes now. He said it wouldn't take him more than an hour. . . ."

Bill Adams said doubtfully, "But, Marsh, I didn't actually see Johnny shoot, you understand. I saw him start to draw—then guns started poppin' and I sort of lost track. . . ."

"Sure; sure," Marsh said, but he was not impressed.

Jeff Slater said smoothly, "But, Marsh! Even if Johnny did shoot him, Jaynes was wavin' a gun at him. It'd be plain self-defense!"

"Self-defense, eh? One old man against the pack o' you! Come on, Johnny. And you, Train. You can argue self-defense in court, maybe; it don't go down, with me!"

PACING up and down in the cell where Marsh had left him, Johnny swore flatly and ran his fingers through already-tousled hair. Beside him, the man who called himself Jim Train was whistling.

It had an eerie sound, that whistling.

There was no tune to it, and it was thin and shrill; yet it had a plaintive sweetness in it, an illusive melody that was haunting and somehow lovely. . . .

The whistling stopped abruptly and Train's voice was soothing in the silence. "Take it easy, kid," he said kindly. "Look: We're in this business together, and I'm a stranger here. It'll do you good to talk. How about sittin' down and tellin' me all about it? About Slater—how you come to be workin' for him—why workin' for Slater should set Jaynes against you—the whole business?"

"But I can't talk—Look, mister, *you* know I didn't shoot Angus! You do know it, don't you?"

"Sure, I know it. You didn't have time. I landed on you too soon." Train chuckled quietly. "But it wouldn't do much good for me to tell Marsh that; not while I'm still a suspect myself. Later, maybe I can help you. Right now, suppose you help me a little. What's all this about, anyway?"

Johnny sat down. He did not speak for a moment, letting his mind run back over recent events.

"It's the same old story: small ranchers tryin' to make a go of it, and failin'. I was one of them. . . . Damn it, Angus called me a traitor! I lost as much as any of 'em, didn't I? I put every cent I could scrape, and four years of hard work, into that spread of mine, and then lost it! Slater offered me a ridin' job, and I took it. Because I did, Angus and the rest of 'em call me a traitor! Hell! A man's got to live—"

"Slater must be damned unpopular." Train's voice was gentle, prodding.

"Yeah, he's unpopular. All the small ranchers think he's stealin' their cattle. Maybe he is! Come right down to it, I reckon he is, myself. But—it was work or starve! And I couldn't leave, to get a job somewhere else. I couldn't leave Mary . . ."

"Mary. That'd be Jaynes' daughter . . . Yeah, I can see how that'd be, all right. . . . How long you been workin' for Slater?"

"Only a week. He ain't asked me to rustle no cows so far! But if he did—hell, I might as well have the game as the name, I reckon. At that meeting this morning they practically called me a rustler. Slater's ranch-boss for the Sinclair Cattle Company, one 'o the biggest outfits in the business. If *he's* rustlin', who am I to buck him? How'd all the big owners get their start, huh? Any o' the old timers'll tell you. It wasn't by bein' too proud to slap a brand on a maverick if they found one. Maybe that's where I've been a fool, workin' too hard, bein' too honest! If workin' with Slater is bein' an outlaw, bein' an outlaw ain't so bad. A man don't have to worry about bankers, drought, and store bills. . ."

Train chuckled. "Sure! Bein' an outlaw's fine! Easy money, no worries. Romantic, too! Slater's some interested in the Jaynes girl himself, ain't he?"

"Jeff? Oh, he was, I reckon. Come to think of it, she went out with him a time or two. Why? How'd you happen to know—?"

"Just a guess, mostly. That, and—I saw the way he looked at her. He was talkin' to her, comfortin' her, sort of, while you and the sheriff was havin' your powwow."

He stopped speaking and the sudden silence drew Johnny's glance toward him. Train sat motionless, seemingly relaxed, yet there was a listening tension in him that was somehow startling.

"Somebody comin', the back way. I wonder—"

"I didn't hear anything. . . ." Johnny whispered back.

A floorboard creaked then, and Johnny jumped. A shadow fell across the cell and Johnny wheeled sharply, staring at a figure vaguely outlined against the barred

door. It took him a moment to identify that figure, and when he did place it, the thing had no meaning for him. The man was Cluff!

"Look, kid." Cluff's husky whisper carried haste and urgency. "Doc's got the bullet. It's yours! Don't ask me how-come, but that's the answer! Jeff's tryin to fix bail, but they're plenty sore. . . ."

Cluff was working at the door now. Johnny heard the jingle and clink of metal.

"Me and Eldridge figured it'd be smart to get you out o' here 'fore somebody starts a necktie party! Sheriff sent a deputy over t' fetch you; gave him the keys. That made it easy! . . . Come on! You, too, Train. You ain't in this, I reckon, but I'll say this: You ain't no amachoor gun-slinger. Maybe you could use a job, huh? Like I told Jeff, there's plenty trouble comin', and a man that can shoot like you can, I'd rather have him on my side!"

Again it seemed to Johnny that this business had a nightmare quality. It was unreal; it wasn't happening! His bullet in Jaynes simply wasn't possible! And yet, Cluff couldn't be lying. . . . A necktie party, Cluff had said! Threatening *him*, Johnny Fuzell!

THE door was open now and Johnny stepped through it, feeling the thud of Train's steps as Train followed him. They slid along a dark hall to a door that opened into an alley. There was a man there, holding four horses. It was Eldridge.

Close against the wall of the jail, Johnny caught a brief glimpse of a prone figure, bound and gagged. That would be the deputy.

Wils Eldridge laughed softly. "Hi, Train. We brought you your own horse. Thoughtful of us, wasn't it? We just made out like we was takin' him to water."

"Thanks, Wils. Hi, Handsome. Easy, boy—"

Handsome. A funny name, Johnny thought, for a horse as ugly as this one! But the buckskin was big, and he was fast. Once they straightened out down the alley it was the buckskin who led the way for them.

They swung left between two buildings. Main Street opened ahead of them and Johnny glanced back. Men yelled, and Johnny ducked low in the saddle, hearing the whine of lead past him even before the crack of the shot reached him.

It hurt, this being hated! He'd never thought of that, before. People had always been friendly, but he couldn't blame them for hating him now; with Jaynes dead, and Johnny's bullet in Jaynes' body! . . . Only, it *wasn't* Johnny's bullet! But even Mary would believe it!

He looked up as Train's voice came from beside him. "You take it easy, kid," Train said gently. "Just take it easy. I'm leavin' you now. Better for us to split up. But I'll see you at the Diamond, I reckon tonight or tomorrow. Keep your chin up, Johnny. Things ain't as bad as they seem, ever!"

He was gone then, swinging left and away through the scattering timber. And Johnny stared after him, his lower lip trembling, conscious now only of hoofs under him and around him—conscious too that every hoof-beat took him farther from the things he knew, the things he loved.

What was it he'd said back there in the cell about being an outlaw? It didn't matter. He was an outlaw now, all right; He'd known vaguely, when he took the job Slater had offered, that it might mean putting himself outside the law, but he had thought, "I can decide, when the time comes." Ordinarily, it might have been that way—a gradual change, one thing leading to another, by easy stages. . . .

But he hadn't been given a chance for a decision, now. He'd had no choice!

He thought, "There's no use wishin' things were different. I'm in—I'll have to make the best of it!"

HE was still making the best of it when Train showed up at the Diamond the following day.

But it was not the same Train, Johnny thought wonderingly. This was not the soft-spoken man who had sat beside him in the jail. This was not even a man seeking a job! This was a wary, hard-eyed, crisp-voiced stranger who greeted Jeff Slater as an equal, as one businessman to another.

"I was talkin' to Ed Werber, down in Leesville, Slater," Train said quietly. "And I got the idea you and me could make each other a nice piece of money. That's why I'm here."

"Werber?" Johnny saw Slater's eyes turn wary. "So you're a friend of Werber's . . . Johnny, run along and let me talk to Train alone, eh?"

But Train objected. "Hell, Slater, Johnny's my pal! He's workin' for you, ain't he? In which case, I reckon it ain't goin' to shock him too much to know you pick up a stray now and then! Or that I buy 'em! Let him stay."

Slater frowned, and the glance he shot at Johnny had a question in it. But Train was talking again, taking the acceptance of his order for granted.

"Werber's bought a lot of stock from you, Slater, in dribs and drabs. I ain't interested in that sort of buyin'; I want five hundred to a thousand head. As close to the Border as we are here, I can deliver 'em across the river in two night's easy drivin'. Werber's been payin' you seven dollars a head, delivered. I'll pay you ten—and take delivery within twenty miles of where we're settin': in that basin at the head of Wildcat Canyon. How's that sound to you?"

Five hundred to a thousand head, at ten dollars! Slater sat down slowly, forgetting Johnny for the moment. So big that a man couldn't afford to be squeamish.

"How about payment?" Slater said slowly.

"Cash on the barrel-head. You didn't think I'd ask for credit, in this business?" Train chuckled.

"But, roundin' up a herd like that'd take time, Train. This range—well, it's pretty well drained. They're mostly small outfits. Pickin' up that many cattle would mean makin' a clean sweep.

"Make it a clean sweep, then!"

Train leaned forward. His voice now had a sneering edge that Johnny had never heard before.

"Look, Slater. You're at the end o' your rope here. Don't try to deny it; I know! Some o' the cattle you've sold Werber were Diamond cattle. The Diamond belongs to the Sinclair Cattle Company. Jim Sinclair may be slow about suspectin' that sort o' crookedness in the men he hires, but he ain't dumb! First thing you know, he's goin' to land on you. You ain't figurin' to fool him when he can see for himself, are you? If you are, you're a fool!"

He sat back then, grinning. "Which means it's time you was makin' a clean-up and headin' for greener pastures, Slater. I'm showin' you the way to do it."

"You seem," Slater said slowly, "to know a lot about my business—or you think you do! And a lot about Jim Sinclair."

"I make it a point," Train said flatly, "to know somethin' about a man before I make him a proposition. As to Sinclair—yeah, I know him, or used to. . . ."

"I don't," Slater said with sudden interest. "I got this job sort of by accident. The man I was workin' for sold Sinclair a big herd; I delivered 'em, and Sinclair sent me on up here with the cattle; told

me just to take charge until he made different arrangements. He never did. . . . They tell me he's hell on wheels! I hear he's a range detective for the Cattlemen's Association, and a deputy United States marshal, beside ownin' the Sinclair outfit. Only they tell me he holds down them lawman jobs under the name of Bonnet. . . . You know about that?"

"Yeah." Train shrugged. "His name's James Bonnet Sinclair. He started out workin' for the Cattlemen's Association under the name o' Jim Bonnet, so there wouldn't be any chance of cashin' in on his old man's name and money. Used the same name when he took his Federal commission."

"But this Bonnet—they call him the Whistler, don't they?" Johnny asked eagerly. "The fastest man with a pair of guns in the Southwest!"

"Maybe he is, and maybe he ain't," Train said flatly. He stood up slowly and Johnny saw his eyes slide swiftly to the open door.

A man stood yonder in the ranch-yard staring with frozen interest at Train's buckskin. The man was Bud Nevers, one of Slater's gunmen.

"You can never tell about gun-speed," Train went on. "Sinclair ain't tackled *all* the fast gun-throwers in the country. Me, for instance. . . ."

Nevers was coming at a half run toward the ranch house now. Train stepped out of line with the doorway. It was a casual movement; yet it put Train with his back to a blank wall, facing the door, and also facing Slater and Johnny also.

Bud Nevers barged inside like an angry bull. He took two short steps past the doorway and halted, head low and swinging.

His eyes found Train, and Johnny saw him jerk into an instant menacing rigidity. "By God, I knew I knew that horse out there! This time—"

"Make your play, Nevers!" Train's voice was hard and low-pitched. But something in it sent a cold shiver down Johnny's spine. "Or do you have to talk yourself into a lather first?"

Nevers' hands twitched, and there was a thin slaver at the corner of his mouth. Johnny saw Train's hand jerk, and stop.

Train's movement toward his guns was a trick, meant to startle Nevers, to make him draw. It worked.

Nevers' hands hit his gun-butts with a ringing slap. Even in that split second, Johnny had a fleeting glimpse of Train's face. It was hard, bitter, twisted with what seemed to Johnny to be a sick repusion, as if the man hated himself and the world.

Johnny could not remember seeing Train draw. He saw only the blue flash of the Colt as it lifted; heard only the smashing reverberating thunder of the two shots.

Bud Nevers' bullet tore plaster from the wall a yard to Train's left. But Train's bullet hit flesh with a sodden, smacking impact that drove Nevers back as from an ax-blow.

The thud of Nevers' body as it landed, and the flat menace in Jim Train's voice later, were things that Johnny long remembered.

"Well, Slater?"

Slater's lips moved once, but no sound came from them. His eyes were wide with shock and amazement. He licked his lips and swallowed hard. "Not me! I'm not mixed up in this!"

TRAIN nodded. There came a pound of running feet in the ranch-yard and the clamor of voices.

"Nevers and I had met before, that's all, Train said, low-voiced. "He must've carried a grudge."

Men crowded onto the porch now, jamming the doorway, staring through the side window. Slater said slowly, "That was between you and him, I reckon."

Slater's easy acceptance of this killing puzzled Johnny a little. But Slater's next words explained it. "It needn't keep us from doin' business, I reckon."

Train grinned crookedly, and sheathed his gun. "My offer stands," he said crisply. You takin' it, or leavin' it?"

"I'm takin' it!" Slater said swiftly. "How long will you give me to round 'em up?"

"Ten days. I can wait that long; no longer. It'll mean throwin' a drag-net over the whole range, but you can do it. It ain't as if you had to trouble to blot the brands."

"It's a deal!" Slater said grimly. "I'll have at least five hundred head for you, ten days from today."

"At the head of Wildcat Canyon," Train said.

He turned and strode toward the door; then paused there and faced Slater again. "I hate to ask you to spare another hand, Slater." His glance dropped briefly to the body on the floor. "But I need Johnny. I've got some scoutin' around to do; got to pick the best way o' gettin' that herd south. I'll need a guide. Anyway, it ain't safe for Johnny here, now that he's wanted. How about it?"

When Slater nodded dubiously, and Train's said, "Let's go, Johnny."

After all, riding with Train would be better than stealing cattle from your own friends! And that would be the program, if he stayed with Slater. . . .

TO JOHNNY, the days that followed were a never-ending nightmare. Riding with Train gave Johnny a new conception of the outlaw business. It was grim and lonely; a job of taut nerves, of never-ending vigilance, and suspicion.

"A man in our game, Johnny," Train said gruffly, "can be careful a lot o' times, for nothin'. But he may be careless only once and get a bullet in his back!"

"A man in our game!" The phrase bit deep into Johnny's consciousness. He didn't like the sound of it!

It was on the fourth night that Johnny witnessed the first of Train's meetings with an unseen accomplice.

They were riding up a rocky arroyo, and the sound of their horses' hoofs filled Johnny's ears. But Train's ears were those of a wolf, and some sound in the darkness checked him. The first hint Johnny had of it was the glimpse he had of Train's gun flicking up in the moonlight like the tongue of a snake. Johnny spun his mount to the left, into the shadows, his fingers clawing at his own gun. A hidden voice came to them.

"Take it easy, Jim. It's me."

Train's voice was steady. "What is it?"

"He's out tonight; but he'll be back around midnight. Them figures you wanted—zero, R7, L1, R4, L zero. Got it?"

"Zero-seven-one-four-zero," Train said softly. "Got it, and thanks! Take care 'o yourself."

There was a slithering sound as of a body slipping away in the shadows; then silence. Johnny gasped once and Train chuckled. "Come on," he said. We've got a chore to do, Johnny. How are you on burglary? Ever crack a safe, Johnny? Time to start, then."

It was not until they had dismounted almost in the shadow of the Diamond ranchhouse that Johnny understood it. The chore they did was burglary, all right; and the figures which had come to Train out of the darkness proved to be the combination to Slater's safe.

Standing there in the pulsating darkness, holding carefully shielded matches while Train worked that combination, Johnny learned by bitter experience the meaning of fear. Physical courage was one thing, and Johnny believed that he had it; but this business of midnight stealth—of knowing that if that death found you, it would be no more than

justice—this was different! Johnny cursed softly and struck more matches.

There was a couple of thousand dollars in that safe; Johnny guessed, and there were bank-books. Train put the money back where he had found it, but he made several penciled notations on the back of an old envelope before the bank-books, too, went back into the strongbox and the tumblers clicked home.

"What the hell?" Johnny asked in amazement. The safe was closed again now, and Train was grinning. Johnny could see that grin in the dim light that struck Train's face as it filtered in through a nearby window.

But it was not until they were safe in the hills again that Johnny finished his question. "But, hell, Jim! I thought you and Slater were in this business *together!*"

There was no grin on Train's face this time. "Thinkin' about honor among thieves, eh, Johnny? There's no such thing! In our game, kid and it's dog eat dog. You better learn that, or you won't last long on the owlhoot! Go to sleep, kid; let me do the worryin'."

But Johnny did his share of worrying. The nervous tension was a growing thing; it got worse instead of better. What of the posses that must be hunting them? It was hard to remember that, to all the world on the other, safe, comfortable side of the law, he—Johnny Fuzell—was a hunted, hated killer. Yet it kept a man awake at night; and even a twig snapping in the darkness jerked his nerves into an aching tension.

IT would have been better, Johnny reflected, to have worked with Slater. At least there would have been action; for Slater was busy. Raids such as Slater was making now could not be hidden and the whole country was buzzing like a disturbed bee-hive. They heard the repercussions of Slater's labors in the pound of hoofs at night, telling of the passage of swift-riding horsemen.

It was not until the ninth day that Johnny had so much as an hour away from Train. And it was in that single hour that he met Mary.

They were riding warily along a wooded ridge hardly more than a mile north of the Jaynes ranch house when Train checked abruptly and said, "You ride on, Johnny. Meet me in an hour by that red rock where we camped Tuesday."

Train swung aside then, sending his buckskin down the slope; and Johnny swore softly, puzzled and a little hurt that Train should leave him out of what must be another rendezvous.

But he was glad, a half-hour later.

Seeing Mary coming toward him, her hair tumbled, her face pale and stricken, her eyes downcast—but yet brightening at sight of him—hit Johnny harder than anything else in all this sorry business. But even in that moment he was reminded of a remark of Train's: "No use hopin' for a home, or peace, or a decent woman, Johnny—not for a man in our game. We left those things behind us when we turned outlaw."

"*Our* game! To hell with it! It's not *my* game! I'm not cut out for it!"

But once you were in the game with men like Jim Train and Jeff Slater, men like Cluff and Eldridge and Henry and the others, there was no escape.

"Mary, you don't—You know I didn't kill your father, don't you? You didn't believe it?"

"I did at first, Johnny. How could I help it? But I don't now; not since Train talked to me. . . ."

"Train?"

"Yes. That same day, right after you escaped from jail, he came back into town. There was no charge against him, and he told Marsh he had no part in the jail break. Anyway, Marsh didn't hold him. And then he came to me. He said

that he could prove you didn't shoot dad, and would prove it when the time came. It made me so—so happy, Johnny! Even when my heart was breaking . . . He's *good,* that man. . . ."

If she could have seen him when he shot Nevers, Johnny thought grimly, she woudn't have thought so!

"But what about you, Johnny? You haven't been riding with Slater, have you? He's gone crazy! He's raiding all the ranches. Johnny, you haven't—?"

"No. I've been—with Train."

"Oh, thank heaven for that. What's he doing, Johnny—Train, I mean? He said he had plans—that would make things right for us—for you. . . ."

"I don't know." Johnny's voice was edged with bitterness. "I don't know what he's doing!"

"Then ask him, Johnny. Oh, I've got a feeling about that man; a feeling that things are going to be—different—because of him! You will ask him, won't you?"

Yes, things would be different, all right, because of Train! The country had been in distress before Train's coming; it would be wrecked, afterward! Wrecked and barren, stripped even of its scant remainder!

"Yeah, I'll ask him. But I must go now, Mary. He's waitin' for me, and he'll wonder—"

"Oh, Johnny, not yet; not for a minute!"

He kissed her then, and felt her cling to him. If only there were something he could *do!*

HE heard the voices long before he came in sight of the red rock where Train was to meet him, and he halted, listening. The sounds came to him through some trick of echo and wind-currents down the canyon. Otherwise, he knew he never could have ridden within eavesdropping distance of Train without Train's knowledge.

"He'll make his last raid tonight," Train said.

"He's holdin' the herd in that basin at the head of Wildcat Canyon. Wils, here, says Slater aims to pick up some Diamond stuff tonight, off the west mesa. That means he'll hit the basin from the north, probably soon after sun-up."

Wils! That would be Eldridge! Johnny remembered the expression he had surprised on Eldridge's face that day of Train's arrival. Eldridge is workin' with Train, he thought, spyin' on Slater. It was Eldridge, I reckon, who gave us the combination to Slater's safe.

Train's voice went on: "Keep your men clear, sabe? And be ready to hit the basin as soon as Slater and his outfit chouse the herd into it. You say you've got better than thirty men; that's more than double Slater's crew. We'll have 'em trapped. You'll hit the basin from the east. Eldridge and I will block the west exit. There's no other way out. You got it straight?"

The answering murmur had a familiar sound, but Johnny could not place it.

What was it Train had said? No honor among thieves! Train was no cattle-buyer! He was simply a thief himself, smart enough to trick another thief into gathering loot for him!

Thirty-odd men! How had Train ever managed to import so many and keep them hidden? Yet it must be true; there'd be no object in their lying among themselves about their own strength.

It was already dark here in the canyon, and Johnny, his mind a turmoil, sat motionless long after the thud of hoofs above him told him of the departure of Train's allies. Disgust surged up in him; at Train, at himself, at Slater, at the whole business.

He wheeled abruptly and sent his horse back down the canyon. He was through! Through with Slater; through with Train; through with outlawry and every-

thing connected with it! He hated the thought of desertion; hated especially the thought of deserting Train, for oddly enough, he still liked him. But this was more than Johnny could stomach.

He smashed into the Jaynes ranch house like a wild man, and Mary stared at him, her eyes wide with sudden terror. It was a matter of seconds before he could make her understand him, could get answers to his questions.

The men were gone, she said; had been gone all day. They were never at home lately. She didn't understand it.

"I'll find 'em!" Johnny snapped. "Them —or somebody!"

But they were *all* gone; Adams, and Street and Hunt—all the small ranchers. All he could find were startled, wide-eyed ranch women who knew nothing whatever of the whereabouts of their husbands.

It was close to midnight before he thought of Slater. Slater was a thief, but he was a local thief! Train's gang would take the cattle out of the country; leave them all stripped and bankrupt, utterly helpless. But Slater might stop that, and there'd be time later to stop Slater! With Johnny's testimony, the law should be able to deal with Slater. And Train would be gone before the law could catch him. . . .

Johnny headed westward toward the mesa. Slater was there, Train had said, rounding up the remnants of the Diamond herds. Slater to block Train . . . the law to take care of Slater. It was dangerous, even deadly—but worth trying!

CHAPTER FOUR

Gun-Chore for the Whistler

MIST lay a thick blanket in the valleys and it was black dark there even while the ridges lay white and eerie in the light of a scurrying moon. The night still lacked three hours of daybreak when Train lifted his buckskin out of the shadows onto the wet grass of a point overlooking Wildcat basin, and the stretch of time ahead was a burden on him.

For Train was worried. Johnny's desertion had pleased him, in a way; but it had worried him too; for he had no sureness of what the boy might do. "I set out to cure him of outlaw fever," Train thought dryly, "but the cure took effect too soon! This thing is figured pretty fine. If Johnny dropped a monkey-wrench into the machinery, it might be bad."

Below him, cattle moved vaguely in the gray soup that climbed halfway up the slopes, and there were other cattle under the fog. Slater had done a thorough job. There were more than six hundred head in the basin already. If Slater's raid tonight were successful it would add a hundred or so more. . . .

Train said softly, "Okay, Wils. Stop playin' Indian and come on out of the bushes. How's things below?"

Wils Eldridge came out of the timber behind Train, a misty figure on a misty horse. "How the hell you heard me," he grumbled, "is more than I know, Jim! There's a crap-game in the cabin down there. Not a very good one. Three-handed. I lost six bucks. They're supposed to be night-herdin'. And there's a man at each end o' the basin."

"You always was a sucker," Train said mildly. "If I find that six dollars on your expense account, I'll—"

He stopped abruptly, listening to the sudden distant sputter of gun-fire. The sounds died gradually and Train's ears, finely tuned to the night's noises, caught the faint tremor of hard riding, and then again the flat, spatting echoes of gun-fire.

Train swore flatly and Wils Eldridge said, "What do we do, Jim?", his voice brittle.

Train said, "That damn kid!" And let the thought go. "They've come together

somehow, Slater and the others. . . . Come on!"

The buckskin lunged down-slope into the mist. Smashing down through slapping branches and tangled underbrush, Train figured that Slater would head instinctively down the west canyon into the basin, since the fight had apparently moved westward.

He swung left sharply, feeling the change in the buckskin's labor as they hit the up-slope. Behind him he could hear the rip and crash of Eldridge's progress.

Guns cracked again somewhere ahead and Train checked suddenly, fixing the report of that contact into his own mental geography. This was a different kind of fighting now. The first had been abrupt, like a pack of firecrackers all exploding together. This now was slower, more deliberate.

He could picture the fight from the sound of it: the first startled meeting of riders, popping off at each other in mutual panic, and now, Slater's stubborn resistance as the attack circled his herd.

Through the breathing of his own and Eldridge's horses, Train caught too the swelling rhythm of still other riders. That, he guessed, would be Slater's night-guard coming up to Slater's assistance.

HE spurred forward and cut left sharply, heading down-slope into this new canyon to intercept that rescue. A voice slashed up at him out of the darkness, but Train went straight forward, pinning his faith on his own deductions. A gun spat viciously out of the shadows ahead, and Train's own gun targeted on that red muzzle-light, his Colt kicking solidly against his wrist as the buckskin carried him toward it.

A yell answered his shot and he heard the quick rumor of flight. Guns were talking further down the canyon now and Train stopped, flinging his voice back to Eldridge. "There's only three or four of 'em. Swing your men left and chase 'em back into the basin!"

He heard Eldridge's bellow of assent and swung the buckskin left and right and left again, up-slope and down, yelling in different voices, firing his gun, trying to make it seem to the men below him that the slope was thick with riders.

It was the best he could do. Eldridge might or might not be able to carry out that deception, but Slater's reënforcements were in flight now. Even if they discovered the ruse, they would be delayed, at least.

He swung right, up the canyon, hearing the sound of Eldridge's pursuit fading down the canyon behind him. His face and body were stung and bleeding from the whip of branches, but he scarcely felt them, his senses busy with the sounds ahead. Slater was moving faster now, coming nearer. . . .

A rider burst through the fog like a phantom and Train reined up. "Marsh?" His voice ran tentatively across the interval and, back of that rider, he saw others come pounding toward him.

His answer came: "Marsh, hell!" And gun-flames stabbed at him. He spurred the buckskin left, hearing the keen whisper of lead around him. His own guns were talking again, bucking in his hands, the flat explosions slapping hard against the hillsides.

"No passage here, Slater!" His shout was mocking, triumphant. Even as he yelled, his fingers were busy ramming fresh cartridges into his guns. "We've got you between us! Come on, boys; close in!"

The shapes yonder in the fog had melted now, but they had not retreated far. Beyond them, other guns kept up an eager crackling, the sound forming a wide arc across the upper end of the canyon. A single horse broke free of the milling group nearest him and cut south-

ward up the slope, the flight invisible. It was a thing Train could not prevent, but he could guess its meaning; and it made him eager to have this thing finished.

He sent his voice yonder, scathing and cynical. "I'm bettin' that was Slater that ran, eh? What's eatin' you boys—riskin' your lives for wages where Slater won't risk his for a fortune?"

The arc of gun-fire to the eastward was nearer now, converging rapidly. One of the Diamond riders yelped sharply as a slug stung him. "He's right, by God!"

"Throw down your guns then!" A new voice to the eastward took command now and the circle of guns there fell silent. Train heard the thud and clash of weapons as Slater's men obeyed.

HE SENT the buckskin forward, seeing Slater's men materialize before him. There were other men there too, now; men on foot, with guns leveled.

Train said, "Johnny?" very softly; and heard a startled movement beside him.

He gripped the boy's arm, pulling him clear of the huddle. "You've been with me!" he murmured. "All the time! Remember it!"

Johnny's answering whisper was taut, puzzled. "But, Train! I thought . . . I went to Slater because . . ."

Train grunted. So that was it! The kid had warned Slater, so that Slater had come down at the basin from an unexpected angle and had bumped into trouble in the darkness.

A big voice made a steady rumble and Johnny's murmur held an incredulous bewilderment. "But Train! That voice! That's Sheriff Marsh! What the hell—?"

Train chuckled. "Look, son. Some things have got to be explained to you! The main thing now is—you didn't kill James. Nobody even thinks you did—except you. Cluff killed him."

"Cluff!"

"Sure. Listen; Cluff carries a Smith and Wesson gun, same as yours. When that thing happened, you and Slater cut off my view of Cluff and Eldridge. I reckon Slater and Eldridge kept you from seein' Cluff. Well, Cluff shot Jaynes. He did it before Eldridge knew what was happening. Then, when Cluff bent over you, he swapped guns with you.

"They wanted you hooked, sabe? Wanted you definitely branded an outlaw, so they could count on you. I figured what must've happened, and told Marsh. Since then, Eldridge has sworn to it. He saw Cluff switch guns with you."

The sheriff loomed suddenly out of the darkness, close beside them. "Jim? Reckon you're wonderin' what happened. Well, they bumped right into us; drove the stock almost through us before—Hel-*lo!* If it ain't young Johnny! How about it, Jim? Is Johnny one of 'em?"

"Johnny's been workin' with me," Train said firmly. "The kid's okay. How about Slater?"

"That's the only bad part of it," Marsh said grimly. "Seems Slater's gone. Leastways we ain't found him."

"He'd head for the Diamond, I reckon," Train said crisply. He turned, then checked his mount for a moment, laughing softly. "When you get time, Sheriff, you better tell Johnny here who I am, and—other things. He's been goin' it blind. And when you get through here, head for the Diamond."

He was gone then, sending the buckskin down the canyon. He hit a ridge and followed it, riding fast in the moonlight. The mist lay thick as soup again as he came down into the wide valley that held the Diamond ranch house. Train checked the buckskin to a running walk, keeping him close-reined, sensitive to Train's own tightening tension.

A lathered horse stood with drooping head and dragging reins in front of the ranch house. . . .

JEFF SLATER straightened slowly from beside his open safe, his hands busy with cash and papers.

Train stood in the doorway, lounging against it, his right gun waist-high and leveled. "It's no go, Slater," he said softly. "You've played your string out."

The man whirled, crouching.

"Watch your hands, Slater!" Train's voice was mild, admonishing. "Just drop what you're holdin', and reach! You wouldn't want what Nevers got!"

Slater's fingers opened slowly, letting the bills and small black books fall, making little slapping sounds on the flooring. Slater's hands lifted.

"What is this, Train? I thought—"

"The name," Train said gently, "is Jim Sinclair—James Bonnet Sinclair."

"*Sinclair!*"

"That's right. Of the Sinclair Cattle Company, Slater. Your boss."

He slid his hand into his shirt pocket and pulled out an envelope. "Sit down, Slater. There at the desk. You'll need your check-books; not the one you used for ranch business—your private ones. All six of them!"

Slater's eyes widened. He slid sideways to the desk and sat down stiffly. "What—do you think you're gonna make me do?"

"You're goin' to write some checks, Slater; six checks, on six different banks. Each check will close the account in that bank, sabe? I'll read you the names of the banks, if you like, the amounts deposited in each, and the names under which the deposits were made."

"How—?"

Sinclair, alias Train, grinned crookedly. "I told you I made it a point to find out about a man before I dealt with him. Eldridge was workin' for me, sabe? That's how I knew about Werber. That's how I know the amounts in those bank accounts. Eldridge gave me the combination to your safe. The checkbooks are in that top drawer, Slater. Get 'em!"

"And—if I don't?"

"If you don't, I'll turn you over to Marsh, and the others. They ain't in any law-abidin' mood tonight. It might be more than I could do to keep 'em from lynchin' you."

"And—what if I—write the checks?"

"In that case, I could keep 'em from lynchin' you, I reckon. Gettin' their money back might influence 'em some—"

Slater laughed harshly. "Gettin' their money back! That's a good one! You'll make a nice thing out o' this, Sinclair! *You'll* keep the money—money that's half or more the proceeds of cattle I stole from *them!* A fine thing—for a deputy United States marshal!"

"I ain't in this case as a Federal officer, Slater. I'm just a private citizen, puttin' my own house in order. I'm to blame for this, in a way, for hirin' you. You write those checks and I'll turn you loose—after the checks have cleared, of course! I figure that that money, pro-rated out to all the losers, will put this range back on its feet again. Includin' the Diamond. To me, that's more important than sendin' you to jail, Slater! Get busy!"

SLATER sat rigid for a moment, but when his hand moved finally it moved toward the drawer that held his check-books. He hauled them out and reached for a pen.

"So you're—the Whistler!" His voice was bitter, contemptuous. "That, I reckon, accounts for what happened to Nevers. Nevers told me once that you arrested him."

"For murder," Train said flatly. "And he escaped. Killin' him kept him from upsettin' my plans here, and saved the state the cost of hangin' him!"

The scratching of Slater's pen filled the silence. Slater ripped the sixth check out of its book. . . .

A horse had come up to the edge of the ranch yard now, and there were other horses, hard-ridden, coming in the distance. Slater had not heard those sounds as yet, but Sinclair heard them. . . .

He stepped forward, picking up the checks. The figures and signatures on those checks matched the names and figures on the envelope. Slater was standing now, and there was a furtive footstep on the porch outside. . . .

"There's just one other thing, Slater; one thing I'd like to ask you. Why did you hire Johnny Fuzell? Why drag him into it?"

Slater laughed harshly. "That's easy! I made a play for the kid's girl once. . . . She laughed at me; said she wouldn't be seen in the company of a cow-thief! I figured I'd turn Johnny into a cow-thief and see how she liked it! I—"

His hand chopped down, ax-like, at Sinclair's wrist. Slater's gun cleared its holster even as Sinclair's weapon hit the floor, knocked free of fingers numbed by that blow. "Gimme them checks, Train, Sinclair, or whatever your name is! This time I've got the drop!"

Sinclair swore softly. Almost for the first time in his life, he had been careless.

Johnny Fuzell spoke flatly from the doorway. "Slater! Let the gun fall."

The gun swung in a flat arc, flame licking from its muzzle. The slug ripped splinters at Johnny's elbow. The kid's gun roared then, its flame stabbing across the room.

Slater grunted as his body folded forward slowly, doubling at the waist like a broken hinge. His gun made a belated bouncing clatter as it hit the floor. . . .

Johnny's face was pale as he stepped forward. "Thanks for askin' him why he hired me," Johnny said slowly. "I—wondered—about that. . . ."

There was a pound of hoofbeats in the yard, and Sinclair's voice slid through it, friendly and steadying. "Thanks, Johnny," he said softly. "You see, even a teacher makes mistakes sometimes. Since you're bound to make 'em, it's better to be on the right side of the law, *when* you make 'em, sabe? Especially a kid like you—with a girl like you've got; a girl with a fine ranch to manage. . . .

"You can bet on one thing Johnny: the Diamond's going to be run different from now on. And small-scale ranchin' can be made to pay, given an even break."

"You're tellin' *me!*" Johnny Fuzell said fervently. "You watch my smoke!"

THE END

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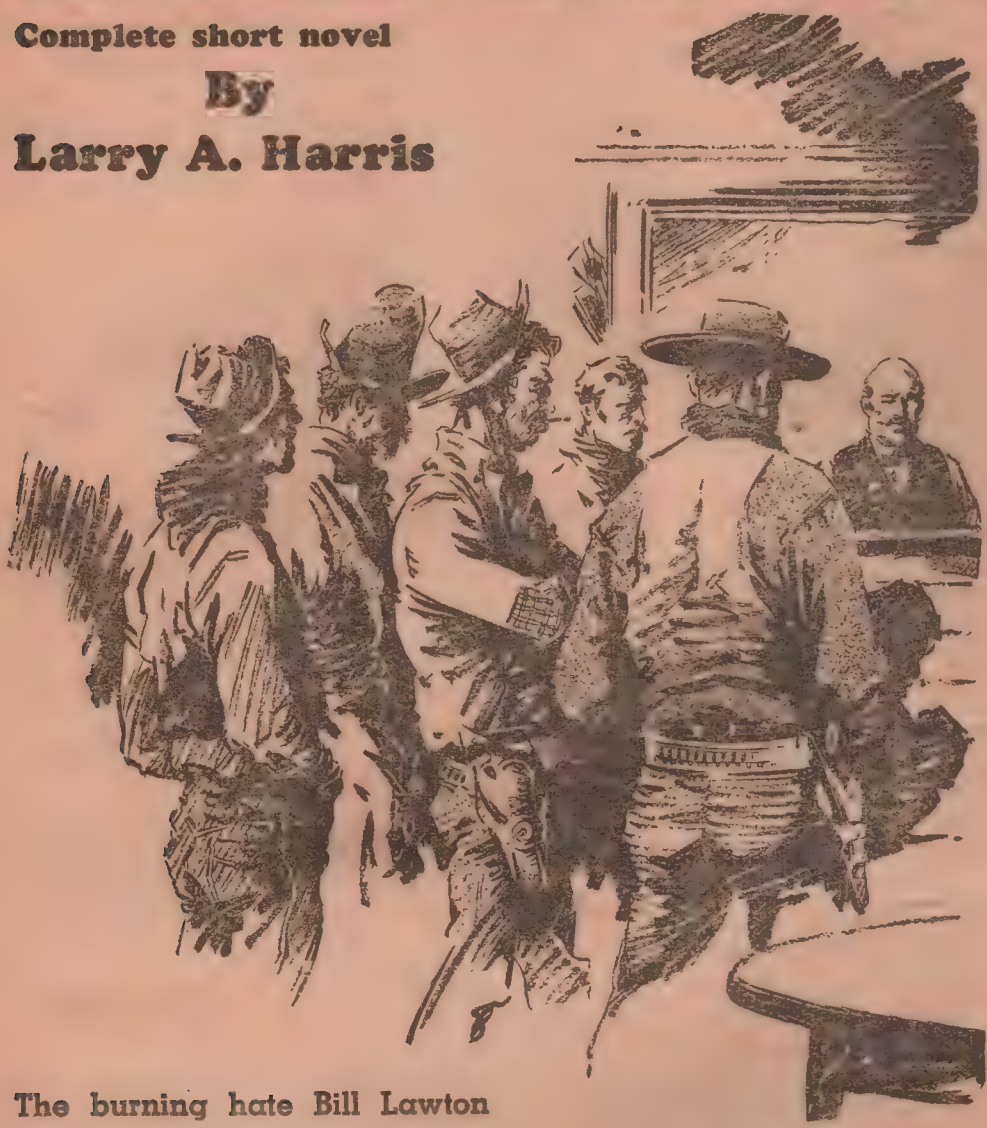

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CHAPTER ONE

Stone-Wall Fugitives

THAT night, Bill Lawton and rat-faced Red Hurlock were in the prison kitchen, mopping the stone floor, when a guard in a dripping black slicker stalked in. He stood for a few moments without speaking, glowering at Bill.

BADGE-TOTER

Bill came up like a springing couger

"The warden is grantin' you a few minutes with your brother, Lawton, if you want to see him," the guard said surlily.

Bill Lawton got to his feet, a tall, wide-shouldered man still this side of thirty. He had piercing, sunken blue eyes that were expressionless, fixed on the guard. His head was shaved and his drab prison suit hung loosely from him.

"Well, do you want to see him, or don't you?" the guard barked.

"Sure I do," Bill said.

As he marched out in front of the guard he knew that Red Hurlock was watching, and wondering. Across the paved courtyard the guard trailed after him, a carbine cradled in the crook of his arm. Lightning slashed through the black heavens above the towering prison walls. Thunder boomed and rain hurled downward in an East Texas cloud-burst.

Through the barred windows of the mess hall, yellow light streamed dismally. Bill noticed the team-drawn refuse wagon

draw up at the front gate and creak to a stop. Grumbling, slicker-clad guards inspected it, then motioned the driver on inside.

In the left wing of the hospital ward, Bill strode past the long line of cots to his brother's side. Jimmy Lawton was sitting propped up in bed. He tried desperately to grin, but the grin wasn't there.

"Oughtn't come out in the rain, Bill," he said in a choked voice. "Liable to ketch cold."

For months, Bill Lawton had known his brother was slowly dying. Rotten food; the gloomy confines of a dark, vermin-infested cell, the man-killing labor in the beet-fields had all been too much for Jimmy. A tell-tale pallor, a wracking cough and a feverish glow in the eyes had first come to Jimmy. When the prison doctor examined the youth he had said one toneless, significant word: "Lungs."

Bill's throat ached, as clammy fingers seemed to be wrenching his heart out. He waited until the guard sauntered over to one of the windows before he spoke. Then in a prison whisper he said:

"Tonight is the night, Jimmy. Hang an' rattle, kid. Vance Colson is still somewhere in Texas. I'll find him somehow. When I do I'll choke the truth from him before I kill him. He's the only one that can clear us. Don't die, Jim boy! Dream an' pray for the day when we can go free. . . ."

There were tears in Jimmy Lawton's eyes as he asked softly: "Red Hurlock goin' with you, Bill?"

"Yes."

"Watch him, Bill. He's a sneakin' killer."

Bill nodded, struggling against the lump that was choking him. When the guard strode up behind him and told him his time was up, he took one of Jimmy's bony hands in his own.

"See you soon, Jim," he said huskily. "Adios, Bill."

BILL walked away without glancing back, his shoulders straight, his head erect, staring from strangely blurred eyes. Outside, he didn't feel the whipping rain against his face, nor hear the rolling crash of thunder. As he approached the cook house the refuse wagon was still backed up to the rear door. The guard left him at the kitchen, and returned to his post at the front gate.

"Hey, you trusties!" the wagon driver was bawling. "Shake it up! Dump in the slop, or take a cuffin'."

He was a red-faced giant with mauling fists and buck teeth. Beneath his slicker bulged a six-shooter. In one prison break he had been known to kill three prisoners.

Red Hurlock paid Bill a swift glance. In silence they began carrying out huge buckets-full of garbage, dumping them into the bed of the stinking wagon. In and out of the kitchen doorway they passed, while the driver took shelter and a cigarette in the enclosed wagon seat.

Once Red Hurlock said through clenched teeth: "Set to go, Lawton. Or turnin' yella?"

Next time Bill passed the shifty-eyed little trusty, he muttered: "All set, Red. An' I'll match your guts anytime."

Refuse piled up in the high-bedded wagon. There were old papers, tin-cans and garbage. Bill went cold all over as the mess-hall guard entered the kitchen just as they were finished. Then, as the man glanced casually around and departed, Bill felt free to breathe again.

When the chore was done, Bill stepped into the block of light in the kitchen doorway. He felt half-sick and trembling inside as his heart hammered against his ribs.

Red Hurlock stepped up beside him. "That's all, driver!" Red said.

The big man on the wagon seat pushed

aside the canvas flaps and peered back over his load.

"About time," he growled, and lifted the lines.

Bill watched, breath tight-held. A dozen mad thoughts hammered through his mind—thoughts of Jimmy, praying, back in the hospital. Trace chains rattled and shod hoofs chopped into the mud. Then the wagon creaked forward, the driver cursing, and Bill Lawton was hurtling forward out of the shaft of light.

His fingers gripped the end-gate, and he drew himself up, reaching out to help Red. The stench of the load filled Bill's nostrils as lightning and thunder tossed through the heavens. In another hundred feet they would be at the front gate!

Both men dived frenziedly into the refuse, gagging, choking, struggling to cover themselves. And each second Bill tensed for the driver's shout of discovery as he felt Red Hurlock's trembling grip on one of his arms. But none came. He couldn't see; he couldn't breathe. Then the wagon stopped.

With lungs bursting, Bill heard the driver's profane talk to the guards. Somebody mounted one of the wagon wheels for inspection. God, why didn't he hurry!

"Okay driver."

Thankfulness stormed through Bill in a tide of emotion. They both heard the creak of the wheels, the slog of hoofs as the wagon rumbled on over the rutty road. And neither of them dared move.

Bill tried to count the seconds. He tried to breathe, only to be nauseated by the thick stench. He wondered how soon the screaming sirens would tell of their escape. Torturingly slow movements ticked away. One mile, Bill figured. Two.

Then the iron-rimmed wheels grated across a railroad track. The loaded wagon bumped heavily, and Bill and Red Hurlock came up together, sucking clean wet air into their aching lungs.

Over the load Bill leaped, ripping aside the canvas flaps behind the wagon seat. The driver whirled, grabbing for his pistol, squalling in amazement. A fierce wild laugh tore from Bill's throat as he smashed his fist into the teamster's face. Into the seat he lunged, Red Hurlock at his heels, cursing in elation. Then Bill and the dazed driver were tumbling over the wagon wheel, clutched in a death grip.

Breath ripped from Bill as he struck the muddy roadbed, but he clung to the driver's throat with one hand, stemming the big man's howl with piston-like blows. When the driver went limp, Bill whirled to see Red Hurlock racing to his side, stooping to snatch up the teamster's fallen pistol.

"Let me at him, Lawton!" Hurlock snarled above the storm. And before Bill could stop him he was beating at the unconscious driver's head with the pistol-butt.

BILL leaped to his feet, ripping the gun from Hurlock's hand. "You crazy damn fool!" he raged. "Why kill him? He's out, an' will be for another hour. We planned this escape without murder. Why make things worse?"

"He had a killin' comin', Lawton," Hurlock panted.

"Come on!" Bill snapped.

The team had drawn the wagon on farther down the road and stopped. The gun clenched in his fist, Bill ran back to the railroad track. Along the gravelly, rain-washed rail-bed he set the pace at a jog, with Red Hurlock at his heels.

Then it came, through the black maw of the raging storm. Bill shuddered inwardly as he heard the distant screaming wail of the prison sirens. Chill, half-sick, he plunged on, heedless of Red Hurlock's

plea to stop. Finally, glimpsing the stone walls of a culvert alongside the track, he stumbled down the siding. In the swirling muddy flood water he and Hurlock crouched, their prison clothes plastered to their trembling bodies.

Like hounded wolves they waited, ears keened for the sounds of the approaching train. Bill breathed deeply of the wet, tangy pine-tree smell, fighting against the growing numbness of his body. He raised a little as he heard the far-away whistle of the oncoming freight!

"That's her, Lawton!" Red Hurlock yelled in his ear. "We had her timed right."

Wild hope clamored anew in Bill. He watched the yellow streamers of the engine headlight come closer, spearing through the downpour. Crouching lower, drawing Hurlock down with him, he heard the engine puff and snort on the up-pull, the grate and slap of the piston arm. Red reflection lanced from the firebox. In the cab window he glimpsed the silhouette of the engineer's head and shoulders.

Engine and tender passed; wheels clicked over the rails. In the rain-slashed darkness the box cars were a roaring blur as Bill jerked to his feet. He spotted the open door of an empty and sprinted along beside it, reached for a hand-hold, then, with all his strength he swung up. Once inside he whirled to lend Hurlock a hand.

Inside the car they found some straw in one corner, and flopped. For the moment they were safe, Bill knew. Each turn of the wheels fetched him nearer West Texas, and home.

Home! The very word was like gall in his mouth, stirring in him all the old hate, the rankling bitterness that filled his soul.

Damning memories plagued him. As if it were only yesterday he remembered the day he and Jimmy and their father, old Tim Lawton, had gone into the Wolf Wells country. Six years ago that was. They had gone there seeking peace and a livelihood.

Despite the veiled threats of the cowmen, Old Timothy turned to raising goats, homesteading a patch of land not far from town. Back in Missouri, Bill had learned telegraphy—and liked it. When the railroad spur was built into Wolf Wells, he took a job as telegrapher for the railroad, sharing his shift with Vance Colson. Those were the happiest days of Bill's life. Wolf Wells boomed into a thriving cowtown. Old Timothy made money, left the cowmen strictly alone and ignored their sneers and jibes.

For all Vance Colson's swaggering, blustering ways, Bill liked the telegrapher. Colson had close-set eyes, a square-jawed face and a liking for too much drink. On more than one occasion Bill took Colson's shift at the key when Colson was dead drunk. When the need for a third shift came along, Bill taught Jimmy the game. The three of them got along well enough. . . . Until the night Colson got in a saloon brawl, and Bill tried to help him.

"Keep out of this, Lawton!" Colson had bellowed. "I can fight my own battles without you. I've had enough of your butting in. Hell, I heard you've reported my drinkin' to headquarters!"

"That's a lie, Vance!"

"Lie, is it? Well, by God, it's no lie that you're meddlin' into my business, goat-lover! I been intendin' to get this off my chest a long time, Lawton. . . ."

As Colson raged on, some of the cowmen lining the bar grinned. Some of them goaded the drunken man on. Bill knew they were aching for a fight. Those cowmen hated him and Jimmy because their father was making money raising goats, while the drouth was hitting the cow business hard.

WHEN Vance Colson finally swung, Bill dodged and smacked him to the floor with a sledge-hammer right. Then Bill walked out, went to the boarding house where he and Jimmy roomed together.

Colson was never the same after that. Surly, ugly-tempered, he spent all his spare time in a side-street bar. It was Jimmy who warned Bill.

"Let's ask for another job farther up the line, Bill," he said anxiously. "Somethin's goin' to happen here. I feel it comin'. Vance Colson will cause us trouble."

But Bill, unwisely, scoffed at the kid's fears.

Jimmy was with him the night the special guards brought the gold shipment and loaded it on the train. Utmost secrecy had shrouded the date for this shipment. Later, Bill and Jimmy were in the station office alone when news flashed in over the wire that the train had been held up near Potter's grade.

By next day, all of Wolf Wells knew of the holdup in which forty thousand dollars had been taken. It was an inside job, folks said. The bank was forced to close, and many of the surrounding cowmen found their deposits wiped out. Railroad detectives came in and a tense hush gripped Wolf Wells, presaging trouble. Cowmen gathered, gun-heeled and grim.

Bill was on duty that afternoon when the sheriff, two railroad detectives, some hot-eyed cowmen, and Vance Colson walked in on him. One of the detectives, an overbearing, fat-jowled man in a derby hat, had a pistol in his hand.

"Come along, Lawson," he grated. "Start trouble and I'll blow your belly apart. I kinda figgered one of your telegraphers had a hand in this holdup. We've already got your brother in jail."

Stunned, Bill followed the men to his room. There they revealed they had found some of the holdup cash beneath his mattress. He knew he had been framed. He knew there was nothing he could say.

That night on the way into town to visit his boys, Old Timothy Lawton was bushwhacked, his goat herd slaughtered, his tiny ranch house burned.

Blinded with shock and grief, Bill only remembered parts of the trial. White-faced Jimmy faced the chill stares of the courtroom with him, weakly maintaining his innocence. Vance Colson took the witness stand and told of Bill Lawton boasting that some day he'd break the damned cowmen.

From the first, Bill knew he and Jimmy didn't stand a chance. And as their persecution went on, he came to know the real meaning of the word hate. It grew inside him like a raging flame, a fierce uncontrollable passion that burned like fever in his blue eyes. His faith was gone; he hated these cowmen —all cowmen! But most of all he hated Vance Colson!

When the judge asked Bill if he had anything to say, Bill rose. Driven by some mad impulse to smash and kill, he made a lunge for Colson. It took four men to hold him, and the cruel blow of a gun-butt to restrain him. When order was restored he said:

"I'm framed! Vance Colson, there, done it. You cowmen backed him to get us Lawtons out the way for your damned cattle. Snakes, the whole damned bunch of you! All right, hang me!"

They didn't hang Bill. He got twenty years in the state prison; Jimmy got fifteen. And when the train pulled out, Bill saw Colson in the watching crowd, grinning mirthlessly.

On the way to prison, Bill said: "Jimmy, I'll escape, and I'll live to kill Colson. Doing that is all that matters."

Now, after five years of prison hell, Bill Lawton was keeping his promise. . . .

Numb from the cold, his wet clothes like ice, he and Red Hurlock covered themselves with straw. Beneath them the wheels clicked over the rails, throbbing into Bill's ears like a dirge. He had no idea how long he'd slept when Hurlock's voice awakened him.

"It's breakin' day, Lawton. We'd best climb off. They'll likely be searchin' the train."

CHAPTER TWO

Where the Gun-Trail Splits

DAYS later, after having picked up a pair of horses, grub and a change of clothes from a frightened Mex sheepherder, and traveling under cover of night, they were making their way into the Brasada country.

Because Hurlock was a trusty in the prison kitchen with him Bill had been forced to confide his escape plans to Hurlock, but he didn't trust the man.

When Bill asked him of his plans, Hurlock snapped, "Ain't got none, Lawton. Just get as far from that damned prison as I can—that's all I want."

But he continued to follow Bill. They skirted towns and ranches, shooting cottontails for food. Streams were plentiful, and at last, one night they crossed the Neuces, heading into the rolling hills beyond.

Bill throttled the tumult in his breast when he splashed across Devil's River. Smell of the desert quickened his pulse. He urged his jaded horse on. Darkness was falling when they came within sight of Wolf Wells.

A cold chill touched Bill's spine as he and Hurlock dipped their horses down a slope. He stared, wide-eyed. Wolf Wells was no longer the thriving range town Bill had know. Only a few scattered lights blinked in the darkness.

Like a ghost town, Wolf Wells stood, most of the buildings deserted, their windows broken. Tumbleweeds and dust had piled high in some of the doorways. The old railroad station roof had blown away. The loading corrals were empty, falling to pieces.

With a bitter ache in his heart, Bill circled the desolate little cemetery where his father was buried. He only paid a brief glance toward the sagging headstones. Skirting the weather-beaten buildings in the center of the town, he came to a halt at the rear of the livery stable.

"You wait here, Hurlock," he said softly, dismounting.

A lantern was burning in the front office. A crippled oldster was hunched over a table inside, playing solitaire.

"Howdy, Pete," Bill said quietly.

Bill stood framed in the portal, his overalls and jacket gray with dust. His head, once shaved, now showed a short growth of hair. Suffering was stamped in the depths of his eyes, the gauntness of his bearded face.

Pete Thurston rose, staring as if at a ghost. Then with a croaking sound of joy he hobbled forward.

"Bill! Bill! By the saints, son, I'm glad to see you. Word reached here two days ago of your escape."

The warmth of this oldster's greeting touched Bill. Warmly he recalled that Thurston was the only man in town who had been loyal throughout the trial. During the cowmen's wrath, he had stuck by Bill to the end.

In reply to Bill's tense-voiced questions, Pete quickly pulled down the shade over his office window. He shook his head dolefully.

"Wolf Wells is shot to hell, Bill," he whispered. "Just after you an' Jimmy left, one drouth follered another. Most of the cowmen lost their ranches an' pulled out. The railroad quit operatin' up here, an' that damn, sneakin' Vance Colson got fired. Last I heerd, he'd lit

a shuck for the Pecos country. How's Jimmy, Bill?"

Briefly, Bill told the oldster. They were silent a moment. Disappointment plucked at Bill.

"Vance Colson framed us, Pete," Bill said. "He's the only man I know that can clear us, and get Jimmy out of that place. I aim to find him."

"God bless you, son," was all Pete could say.

That night before Bill left, Pete presented him with new range clothes. He gave Bill and Hurlock fresh horses, food and water. And never was Bill to know that Pete Thurston had been crippled as a result of a fight with some drunken cowboys three years ago, because he claimed Bill's friendship.

BILL rode away, gloomy and depressed. Hurlock was content to follow in silence. For four nights they pushed on, sleeping during the heat of the day, ever watchful, alert. They knew hunger and thirst in the long stretches of desert. Fear of the law made them avoid the scattered towns.

"Just where in the hell are you headin', Lawton?" Hurlock asked waspishly.

"I'm huntin' a man."

Finding Vance Colson was an obsession with Bill. That was all he lived for. In his fitful dreams he saw Jimmy, pleading with him to hurry. Jimmy couldn't live much longer in that damp East Texas climate. He needed the dry desert air, good food, freedom from worry.

In two more days they were in the rolling basin country near the Pecos. Out of some tumbled, canyon-gashed hills they dipped into a broad valley just at dusk.

"We're goin' to have to show ourselves sooner or later, Hurlock," Bill said. "The town of Jamul is yonder across the valley. I aim to play a bold hand from here out, an' trust to luck. You can do as you like."

"I'll chance it," Hurlock muttered.

They came out on a rutted wagon road that wound through the sandhills and brush. Suddenly rounding a bend, they came face to face with two approaching horse-backers. Bill caught the glint of law-badges on the men's shirts.

One of the lawmen was a hatchet-faced, stringy man, packing two guns. Without warning his hand stabbed down. Then Hurlock's six-shooter was thundering. The stringy lawman's arms flew up as he spilled from the saddle. Beside him, the second law-dog's horse crumpled. Out of that tangle of flying hoofs and dust, Bill saw the lawman hit the ground and roll, stunned by the fall.

With a yell, Hurlock shot his horse forward, his six-shooter tilted for the kill. The stringy lawman was dead; the other man was attempting to rise, both hands lifted. Revulsion flamed white-hot in Bill. Hurlock was already shooting—and missing—aiming at the helpless man's back!

With blinding speed Bill drew and fired. Hurlock screamed in pain, the gun dropping from his hand. Clutching the saddle horn of his bolting horse his raging cry carried through the gun-echoes: "I'll kill you for this, Lawton!"

Then the brush hid him.

CHAPTER THREE

A Town Gone Mad

BILL dismounted, gun in hand. The lawman got to his feet, shaken and pale, but unhurt. He was a chunky little oldster with a rugged, seamed face. Still a little dazed, he glanced at his dead companion; then studied Bill with a strange intensity.

"You can put up the gun, mister," he said shakily. "This is one time Biddle asked for trouble an' got it." He shook his head. "Just what happened in that split second I don't know. But I do know

you kept that jigger with you from killin' me. That puts you one up on me, mister."

Bill smiled thinly. "You greet all newcomers this way?"

"Not all. Biddle was on the prod. There's been enough thievin' and bushwhackin' in Caballo Basin to make a man that way, I guess. We been scourin' the hills all day for killer sign, an' saw nothin' till we bumped into you fellers. I'm Mort McCarthy, sheriff. Your partner killed Biddle an' you saved my life, so the law can lay no claim to you. An' now, what did you say your name was?"

Sheriff McCarthy's blunt honesty appealed to Bill. In probing the lawman's eyes Bill tried to find signs of recognition—and failed. McCarthy was plainly trying to put up a stiff front, trying to hide his fears.

"Smith is as good a name as any," Bill said softly.

Sheriff McCarthy said slowly. "I knew a Smith once. An' I could have trusted him to hell an' back!"

His gaze dropped to Bill's long slender fingers. Then he turned and strode over to his deputy's body.

Bill pondered the lawman's strange actions. He knew that beyond question of doubt every lawman in Texas had been warned to keep a lookout for the two fugitives.

Bill remounted, holstering his gun. Deciding to make a bold gamble, he turned back into the brush and caught Deputy Biddle's horse. He led the animal back out into the road, then he helped the fat lawman thong the deputy's body behind the cantle.

Both men mounted and rode at a walk through the gathering night. Sheriff McCarthy remained silent, staring ahead at the dark road. Bill, hungering for news and man-talk, wanted to probe farther the mystery that surrounded McCarthy, but he bided his time.

According to Pete Thurston, Vance Colson was in this Pecos country. And from that talk with the hostler, Bill gathered that Jamul was the only town of any size in the Caballo Basin strip. Pete had mentioned the discovery of oil here.

Now as they neared Jamul, Bill heard the far-off *chug-chug* of pumping oil wells, the clank and clamor of the rotary drills. Topping a rise he saw lantern-lit derricks at the outskirts of town. Rumbling wagons, the ebb and flow of ceaseless activity grew louder.

"That's Jamul, Smith," Sheriff McCarthy said grimly. "For your own good I'd best ride ahead an' leave you to foller. My office is across from the Diamond Palace Saloon. Before you leave I'd like to talk to you."

Bill let the lawman ride ahead, more puzzled than ever, and then, thirty minutes after, he threaded Jamul's main street. In East Texas, Bill had seen boom-towns, but none to compare to this. A small cowtown had been turned topsy-turvy. Along the mud-churned street straining mules drew heavily loaded wagons. Every vacant lot was dotted with tin shacks and tents. Men tromped the board walks, their profane talk blending into the turmoil.

Here was all the vice and mushroom growth of a frontier hell-town. Drillers, roughnecks and firemen in overalls and lace boots. Gamblers and speculators; hard-eyed cowmen, openly antagonistic to it all. Blaring saloons were jammed with a free-spending trade, while men squalled of a new producer running a hundred barrels a day. A shrieking train whistle drowned out a woman's scream. Red torches gave the street a weird, hellish glow.

Bill found a livery stable and cared for his horse. His request of the liveryman for a job brought quick response.

"Hell, yes, I can put you to work," the barnman told him. "This town's mad, feller. Can't git nobody to do any kind

of chores. Take the night shift fer me an' I'll pay you well."

BILL worked a week and drew his pay. With that money he bought a suit of clothes, shaved and got a room at the hotel. He had his hair trimmed into a short pompadour. Then he made his way to the railroad station where oil cars stood on the siding.

He found the telegrapher on duty to be a talkative gent with thick-lensed glasses. Bill asked him if he'd ever heard of Vance Colson, a former telegrapher. The man started.

"You the law?" he asked quickly.

"Maybe you can guess," Bill said.

"Vance Colson, mister? I'll tell a man I've heard of him. From below the Big Bend, ain't he? Yep, that's the same one. If rumors is right Colson an' his pack of renegades is holed up in the Caballo hills east of town, robbin' the cowmen down to a nub. An' Sheriff McCarthy ain't big enough across the britches to put a halt to his raids."

Bill felt his heart pound. As he talked to the telegrapher for several minutes, plans flashed into his mind. Thus far nobody in town had shown any signs of recognizing Bill. He knew the best place to hear news is in a saloon, so he made his way to the Diamond Palace.

Just outside the batwing doors he halted. From within came the scuffle of bodies, jeers, the smash of fists against flesh and bone. Then a bellowing voice rose above the noise.

"Us oil men are tired of your threats, Holcombe! Fightin' me, are you? You'll get your belly full before we're through. Now get the hell out!"

Unobtrusively, Bill stepped inside in time to see a flashily-dressed man lift a cowman by the scruff of the neck and batter him to the floor. Both men were big, powerfully-built. But the rancher's face was bloody and bruised. One glance showed Bill that he had been hit with a chair.

The fallen cowman's eyes were glazed with pain. Desperately he tried to rise and fight again, but his strength was spent. Then the flashily-dressed gent sent a well-aimed kick into the fallen man's ribs. Roars of approval lifted from the derrick men. There wasn't a cowman in the bunch.

Rage tore through Bill. His crackling voice sheered through the tumult. "He's down an' whipped. Let him alone."

Like a raging bull the oil man whirled, blue veins bulging in his white forehead. Surprise and anger flamed in his beady little eyes.

"You want to take up where Holcombe left off?" he roared.

Mentally, Bill cursed himself for the fool play he had made. But outwardly he was all flame and ice, a tall, clean-shaven gent in ill-fitting store clothes.

"Write your own ticket, mister," he said levelly.

Awed silence gripped the onlookers. Then they were grinning with open relish. A greasy-faced driller smirked: "He asked for it, Bellinger. Give it to him."

Bellinger's thick lips pulled back in an ugly grin. He barged forward slowly, eyes glowing with keen delight. Bill saw his first haymaker coming and sidestepped, lashing through the big man's guard with a chopping right to the midriff. Then Bellinger spun and charged, both fists flailing the air, his face dark with fury.

Bill slashed through with rights and lefts, and went back on his heels as one of Bellinger's blows caught him squarely between the eyes. For an instant the room rocked redly. Yells of the ringing men throbbed in his ears. Then he was weaving in again, bent low, giving and taking body-jarring blows that would have downed lesser men. Wearing Bellinger down was his only hope. Bellinger was

a rough and tumble fighter, hard muscled, but tending toward pouchiness.

One of the oil men tripped Bill, and he went down to one knee. As Bellinger sprang forward, Bill came up like a springing cougar, swinging. Pain lanced up his arm as his fist crashed into the oil man's mouth. Then Bellinger was tottering back, his eyes glassy. He fell into the arms of the crowd and sank to the floor, bruised and beaten.

Bill reeled a little as he turned toward the door. One eye was swollen; blood ran from his lips. Sheriff McCarthy stood near the door, supporting the battered rancher named Holcombe. And as Bill went out he forced a grin.

"Nice town you got, Sheriff," he said.

The moment he reached the sidewalk the sheriff was at his side, gripping his arm, croaking: "You're the first man that ever whipped that pole-cat, Smith. Hell will freeze before he forgets it. Help me with Holcombe to his buckboard. He wants you to go with him."

BILL turned to see the big rancher in the shadowy doorway, bent over, clutching his side as the sheriff darted down the crowded sidewalk. Bill went to the rancher, helped him out to the street, and the sheriff wheeled up in a buckboard. From inside came the rising growl of angry talk.

Holcombe's face was white with pain as he sank into the buckboard seat. "I'd admire to have you go with me, Smith," he gasped. "I've got a proposition—"

Curiosity prompted Bill to climb into the seat with the rancher. He took the reins, sent the frisky team down the muddy street at a hard run. On the outskirts of town Holcombe roused to direct him along the road to his ranch.

They passed the pumping wells and rigs where men and teams milled about in the darkness. The acrid smell of the wet grease mingled with the odor of new oil. The roar of steam boilers and rumble of mud-hogs told of ceaseless activity.

Holcombe remained silent during that five mile ride to his H-Bar ranch at the toe of the foothills. It was drizzling rain when Bill pulled up into the yard. Lamplight shone yellowly through the windows of the rambling ranch house. Sheds and hay-barns loomed up darkly.

Two cowboys hobbled out of the bunkhouse, their strident queries to Holcombe going unanswered. Then the ranch house door opened. For an instant a dark-haired girl stood framed there in the block of light. As Bill helped the rancher from the rig she rushed toward them, her cry a half sob.

"Dad! What's happened?"

Holcombe tried to reasssure her. Bill felt her troubled eyes dart to him, felt the blank stares of the two cowboys.

Then Holcombe spoke heavily. "Madge honey, this is Mister Smith—"

Bill removed his hat. He murmured, "Pleased, ma'am," and turned as she helped her father toward the porch.

In the shed Bill helped the two H-Bar men stable the horses by lantern light. There was a morose sullenness about them that stung Bill. Ignoring the usual rangeland courtesy, they jangled toward the bunkhouse when the chore was done.

Beneath the shed roof Bill paused to build a smoke, contemplating all that had happened. He was about to strike a match when the kitchen door of the main house opened. A figure darted through the rainy darkness toward him.

It was Madge Holcombe, her face pale in the night. Spotting Bill, her pace slowed. Then she was facing him, striving desperately for control. Her soft haunting eyes seemed to search Bill's soul.

"Dad just told me what happened in town, Mister Smith," she said tremulously. "Derrick Bellinger would undoubtedly

have killed him if you hadn't stepped in. I—I want to thank you."

Her voice, her wholesome loveliness warmed Bill, beat at the chill barrier he had built about himself.

He said steadily, "It was nothin'."

Her lips trembled. "Dad wants to see you. I think he has some ribs broken. I was wondering if I should ride back into town for the doctor."

"I can fix him up, I think," Bill said.

He followed her back into the house, through the huge front room to her father's bed chamber. Holcombe was in a nightshirt, lying on the bed, his gray-thatched head half buried in a pillow. His rugged face was drawn, his eyes hot with pain.

Grimly, Bill ordered strips of cloth and liniment. He bound up the old rancher's ribs, while Madge held the lamp for him.

Once Holcombe asked the girl, "Lucy in bed, Madge?"

"Asleep, Dad."

"Stay with us tonight, Smith," Holcombe said tiredly. "Don't feel like talkin' now. Tomorrow I'll explain everything."

Bill agreed to stay, curbing his own impatience. Old Jeff Holcombe's trouble was none of his, he told himself. He wasn't interested in the war that was brewing between the cowmen of Caballo Basin and the intruding oil men. Bill was looking for Vance Colson. For that he had suffered, dared, and lived. . . .

A stir in the doorway of his bedroom awoke Bill. It was daylight. He sat straight up in bed, startled by a curly-headed, impish-faced little girl grinning at him from the doorway. When no rebuke came she hurried toward his bedside.

"Madge, she told me not to come in here," she began breathlessly. "But I wanted to see you. I'm Lucy, and I heard about how you helped my daddy last night. Them hedge-hogs best not try to get tough with you, had they? Sheriff McCarthy rode out at dawn. He said you was a fightin' fool. Sis, she told me not to worry. Worry is what killed my Mom. That's what Doctor Pierson in Jamul said. . . ."

Lucy's flow of words fetched a smile to Bill's lips. She was only about eight. Valiantly she was trying to conceal her troubled spirit. Her smile seemed to thaw something frozen inside of Bill.

"Gee, you *can* grin, can't you?"

"Sure, Lucy."

"They told me—" She caught herself, startled, as her name was called from the kitchen. "That's sis, mister. I'll have to go."

She darted from the room, softly closing the door.

Bill, dressed, found Madge in the front room, wearing a starched gingham dress, her dark eyes troubled.

"Breakfast is ready, Mister Smith," she said softly. "I'm sorry about Lucy waking you—"

"I might have slept till noon if she hadn't," Bill replied.

He ate in the kitchen with Lucy watching him. Madge went into the front room as men rode up into the yard. Bill caught a glimpse of those spur-jangling cowmen as they strode into the house. Stolid and hard-jawed, those dyed-in-the-wool ranchers held an innate hatred for oil men.

The house echoed to their restrained talk. Others came and went, conferring with Jeff Holcombe, awkwardly consoling Madge. Bill felt the tension among them.

When they left, Madge re-entered the kitchen. She said, "Dad wants to see you, Mister Smith."

Bill's nerves tightened when he went into Holcombe's room. From bed the rancher looked at him, eyes harried with fear and hate, doubt and stark savagery. The desperation of a man with his back to the wall, battling vainly against an in-

sidious power, was stamped upon him.

He said grimly, bluntly, "I asked you out here for one reason, Smith. I want you to do something that no cowman in the basin has the guts to do. I want you to kill a man!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Sheriff Without a Name

STEELED as he was, Bill gave a slight start. He said coldly: "I'm not in the bushwhack business, Holcombe."

"Wait, Smith!" Holcombe croaked. "I don't mean back-shootin'. I mean meetin' a skunk face to face an' downin' him fair. In doin' that you'd be savin' every honest cowman in the basin from ruin."

"Who is this man, Holcombe?"

Hope sprang into the rancher's eyes. "I'm comin' to that, Smith. All my life I've claimed to be a judge of horses, cows, an'—men! You've got the hands of either a gambler or a gunman. You're a born fighter, Smith. You've seen plenty of hell. Your eyes show it. Now listen. . . ."

It was a strange story Jeff Holcombe told. Until two years ago the cowmen of Caballo Basin has prospered. They had settled here, years ago, hewing mighty ranches out of this sage-brush wilderness. They held no deeds to their land. Their Winchesters were their abstracts; cows were their stock in trade.

Oil had been discovered to the east of the basin. Then geologists began appearing in Jamul. All the land available near town was grabbed up or leased. A test well was sunk. A gusher was hit.

"Then Jamul went hog wild, Smith. You can see what's happened to it. Derrick Bellinger come in with his rigs an' crews of roughnecks, spottin' claims, boastin' of his political pull. He's got it too! That's the hell of it. He's got a string of shyster lawyers workin' for him. Claims there's a pool of the stinkin' black gold beneath our ranches. If there is, by God, we want it! If a range is to be torn all to hell we want our dues.

"But Bellinger didn't dicker with us. He learned that we had no deeds for our land. The next we knowed word come to Sheriff McCarthy to make us evacuate. I rushed to Austin an' found that Bellinger had bought the whole damned basin for a song. Public domain they called our ranches, and put it up for sale, unknown to us.

"Us cowmen have raised every dime we can lay a hand to, an' aim to fight the case. We've got lawyers from Fort Worth to help us. The case comes up in a month. We've got that money put in escrow in the Jamul bank. But we're not kiddin' ourselves, Smith. Bellinger stands to win!"

"An' you want me to kill Bellinger?" Bill asked.

Jeff Holcombe said slowly, "You'll be savin' a war by doin' it. You'll save dozens of innocent lives. We'll pay well, Smith. An' you'll be riddin' the country of a snake. Bellinger has tried every rotten trick he knows to make us quit. My hunch is that Colson's outlaw bunch back in the hills are playin' in cohoots with him. Colson an' his killers have stole us blind, raided us, bushwhacked our men—"

"My answer is still the same, Holcombe," Bill cut in.

Hope went dead in Jeff Holcombe. As Bill rose, the old rancher said: "Sheriff McCarthy told me what happened out on the trail the day you came into town. We had in mind makin' you a deputy."

"Hidin' behind a law badge to do a killin' is still a skunk trick, Holcombe. If that's all, I'll bid you good-day."

Bill strode from the room. In the kitchen he found Madge pretending to be busy. A guilty flush stained her cheeks. And as her eyes met Bill's he knew she

had overheard the talk in her father's bedroom.

"Take one of the horses in the shed, Mister Smith," she said coolly. "Leave it at the livery stable in town. One of the men can pick it up later."

Burning with futile resentment, Bill hurried out to the shed. There he rigged a horse, mounted, and spurred down the road toward town. Fate was playing a strange hand in his questing game. Deep inside him smoldered his old hatred for cowmen. Cattlemen had put a scar on his heart that would take a long time to heal.

Bill tried to tell himself it was funny as hell to see these cowmen suffer. These Caballo Basin men were the same breed who had persecuted him, sent him and Jimmy to prison.

"To hell with them!" Bill muttered.

OVERHEAD the sky was stormy and threatening. Pools of water stood in the ruts of the road. Bill rounded a curve in the trail. Then quite suddenly, two horse-backers spurred out of the high brush to confront him. Bill reined in.

"Easy, Smith!" one of the men rasped. "Lift both hands if you want to keep alive!"

Bill's arms raised. Both men wore slickers. Beneath their hat brims their eyes were glittering and deadly.

One of the men drew closer, leaned out of the kak and took Bill's gun. "Derrick Bellinger wants to see you, Smith. You'll ride ahead of us into town like nothin' was wrong. Make a funny move an' we'll blast your back-bone apart."

Bill did as he was told, his mind racing. They passed the oil field and wended through the confusion of Jamul's main drag. At one of the riders' low command, Bill halted at the hitch-pole in front of the Diamond Palace Saloon.

He was guided through the batwing doors, past the line of drinkers. They were oil field workers mostly who seemed to sense nothing wrong as the stiff-faced trio passed. Bill caught a glance of Dutch Arnt, owner of the Diamond Palace, leaning against one end of the bar. Arnt was a heavy-jowled, pock-marked man.

In the small, ornately-furnished back room, Bill was brought face to face with Bellinger, who beamed with mock pleasure from behind a desk. About him was the indubitable stamp of a tinhorn oil promoter. Yet ingrained even more was something cold and deadly that was not good to see.

When Bill's two escorts had left, Bellinger said, with premeditated care, "You beat me at my own game last night, but I'm not holdin' that against you. As a matter of fact, I admire your guts. After that you went with old Holcombe out to his ranch. I suppose he told you his side of the sad story."

Bill nodded, puzzled, and Bellinger's smile dropped from his lips. "That basin land belongs to me by all points of the law, Smith. I aim to claim the oil on it. When the time comes to throw them off the land, those fools will fight. I'm goin' to need friends, and guns! I want you to throw in with me. I'll make you rich, feller!"

"The cowmen seemed to think you have the case cinched," Bill observed.

"I aim to have that land, whichever way the court decides, Smith. Courts are tricky. If war comes I want to be ready. My plan is to get you elected sheriff. Old McCarthy favors the cowmen in his weak-spined way. Election is a week off. My men can swing the election. When you get into office you'll do as I say, or—"

Icy shock ran along Bill's nerves. "Or what?" he asked softly.

"Or go back to prison—Bill Lawton. I learned this mornin' who you really are. If you play my game, nobody will ever know but me, an' I don't talk. Mebby sometime I can help you find Vance Colson—the gent you're huntin'!"

FOR a long moment Bill stood speechless, his mind in chaos. When he spoke his voice was hoarse, poignant with bitter defeat. "You win, Bellinger. What am I to do?"

Bellinger's laugh was raspy. "Stay near your hotel room. Talk to no one. I'll do the rest. I've got men that'll watch every move you make, so don't try to outsmart me. When I want you I'll send for you."

Ten minutes later, Bill walked out of the saloon, his face ashen. He would have killed Bellinger with his bare hands if he'd thought it would do any good. But Bellinger had him trapped. . . .

For three days Bill spent most of his time in his room, pacing the floor. When he went downstairs to eat he knew he was being watched. Folks stared at him, whispered his name. Bill Smith, they called him. It was the name that had gone out from Derrick Bellinger's office.

A huge canvas banner was stretched across the main street. Printed on it in red letters were the words that said:

BILL SMITH
FOR SHERIFF!
"He'll Do Right By This Town!"

Bill was on the hotel porch veranda that evening when shots rang out, dull and flat, in the Diamond Palace Saloon. Activity along the street stopped. Out of that ghastly silence rose a man's frenzied scream of agony. The batwing doors of the saloon burst open. Shorty Weaver, a hot-headed basin cowman, ran stumblingly into the muddy street and fell.

In the doorway behind him appeared Derrick Bellinger, a smoking six-shooter in hand. Shorty Weaver was screaming for mercy when Bellinger fired again. Weaver's body jarred, shuddered as he died. From the mercantile store came a woman's sobbing shriek. No one moved as she darted out into the road and dropped beside the body.

In the saloon window Bill saw Dutch Arnt, a sawed-off shotgun poking across the sill. Several of the grease-smeared oil field workers were armed, ready to back Bellinger's murder-play. Across the street a dozen cowmen stood chained with horror, beaten and outnumbered.

Bellinger's challenge rose gratingly. "Weaver just now tried to get tough. It was either kill or be killed. So I killed. From here out you cow-nurses stay on that side of the street."

Contemptuously, Bellinger turned, walked back inside the saloon.

In the doorway of his office, Sheriff McCarthy stood, a witness to the cold-blooded murder. He looked pathetically small, his face white and his eyes those of a doomed man.

With a queer set look, Bill walked out into the street, picked up Shorty Weaver's body. He barely glanced at the sobbing woman. He placed the body in a buckboard, turned to the line of cowmen. Out of nowhere Jeff Holcombe shouldered to the front, his face drawn.

"We'll care for our own dead, Smith," he said hollowly.

Bill turned back toward his hotel. He didn't see Madge Holcombe step out of a doorway. He only knew that she suddenly stood before him, trembling, her dark eyes stabbing him as if he were something unfit to touch.

"I guess snakes *do* run in pairs, Smith. "You're even lower, more despicable than Bellinger! You'll win the election, all right. You'll help him murder honest folks, I suppose. But sometime. . . . sometime—" She couldn't say more.

She fled down the walk.

ELECTION day was proof of Bellinger's influence. Oil field workers swarmed into town and got drunk on the whiskey Dutch Arnt poured for them. Everybody knew that Bill Smith would be elected. Jamul was the largest town in the county. As it voted, so went the election.

A small body of cowmen under Jeff Holcombe rode into the polls and cast their vote for Sheriff McCarthy. They were armed to the teeth, careful to avoid trouble. Jeers followed them out of town. That night a few nervous townsmen acted as election officials. Votes were tabulated, and word spread quickly to the Diamond Palace Saloon, where a roar went up.

Bill Smith had won by a huge majority.

A frightened clerk read the oath of office. Bill repeated it after him, his right hand uplifted. He pinned on a new sheriff's badge. In the group of onlookers stood Bellinger, grinning.

That night Bellinger's rowdy followers got roaring drunk, smashing windows in store fronts, fighting and shooting. A cowboy was found dead in the muddy street at dawn. He had been shot through the back of the head.

Bellinger met Bill in the jail office. "I wouldn't do nothin' about his killin', Bill," he said oilily. "Just stick around here till I have a job for you."

Every fibre of Bill's body screamed at him to kill Bellinger. Fiercely he struggled, hating himself for the price he was paying.

"I know you hate me, Bill," Bellinger said coldly, "but I wouldn't try nothin'. I'm goin' to hold up my end of the deal. I promised you I'd help you find Vance Colson. I aim to do that within a week."

Bellinger swaggered back toward the Diamond Palace Saloon. There was a letter waiting for him in his office. It was from a law firm in El Paso. Bellinger frowned as he read it, then called at once for Dutch Arnt.

"The lawyers run across a test case similar to ours, Dutch. Judgment was given in favor of the cowmen on priority rights."

"Dat iss bad," Dutch offered.

"Mebby not, Dutch. We'll go ahead with our other deal. It takes money to fight a case, an' without money the damned basin men are done. Get word to Colson to ride in tonight an' loot the bank. Bill Lawton ain't goin' to stay in the saddle much longer. Tell Colson he'd best get rid of him tonight. If Lawton's body is found murdered out at an oil rig shack it'll look like the cowmen done it."

CHAPTER FIVE

End of the Blood-Trail

NIGHT spread its dingy mantle over Jamul. Threat of danger and bloodshed dampened the usual gaiety of the honkytonks and saloons. Few people were along the walks. And as always, from the nearby oil field, filtered the monotonous, rhythmic throb and pound of drills, the faint rattling of pipe. Yellow light seeped dismally through the windows of the Diamond Palace Saloon.

In the jail office, Bill blew out the lamp, preparing to leave. He turned, opened the front door, and suddenly froze. Two shadowy figures faced him. A gun barrel jammed deep into his stomach.

"I told you I'd kill you, Lawton!" a familiar voice gloated.

Shock jarred Bill, poured through him in a cold tide. One of the men was Red Hurlock, his rat face twitching.

"Hurlock!"

Then Bill was drawing frantically, knowing he had no chance. Hurlock's hand flashed up and down. As Bill lunged to one side the gun-barrel caught him across the temple. Red fire flamed across his brain as he sagged and fell.

By sheer will alone Bill clung to consciousness. Low voices came through the swirling shadows. He was deathly sick, and blood blinded him. Limp and helpless, he felt hands lifting him, half dragging him along the ground.

After that, Bill had a faint recollection of being held across the swell of a saddle.

When finally he opened his eyes, it was

like coming out of a nightmare. His face was stiff, his head hammering. He found himself propped up against a wall, inside a box-like structure that stank of oil. A lantern cast a feeble glow over the barren room. In one corner hunkered Red Hurlock, eyes glowing like a packrat's. One hand was bandaged and dangled loosely at his side. In the fingers of his right hand was a six-shooter.

"Bellinger's orders was to fetch you to this deserted tool shack to kill you, Lawton," Hurlock told him.

"You say—Bellinger—?"

"Yeah—the gent that got you elected sheriff. You bein' a lawman makes me laugh. I didn't sabe the setup till I got with Vance Colson's bunch. After you shot me, I headed into the hills an' happened into their hide-out. Colson took me in when I told him who I was. He was surprised as hell when I told him about you. Since then he's bidin' his time to get you.

"Bellinger made a sap outa you, Lawton. Him an' Colson framed that train hold-up that you got the blame for. That's where Bellinger got the dinero to go into the oil game. They just been usin' you.

"Colson and his boys are sackin' the town tonight. They're killin' the railroad telegrapher so no word will get out. Bellinger aims to grab the cowmen's money so they can't fight his case. He's smart, Bellinger is. Smart enough to get all the basin land for himself an' Colson. . . ."

Hurlock talked on, taking several swigs from a bottle he had with him. He was one of Colson's bunch now, he said. He'd get his share of the bank loot.

"Listen!" he whispered suddenly.

Like far-away thunder they heard a muffled roar, and Hurlock got eagerly to his feet.

"That's my signal to finish you, Lawton," he said.

HE TOOK one step nearer, and then another. Bill saw the little killer's gun tilt toward his head.

Like a flying piston, Bill's legs drew back, lashed out as Hurlock fired. Burned powder tortured Bill's eyes. The bullet burned his shoulder as he kicked again, spun, and came up fighting.

Black fury was a spur to his strength. Through a haze he saw the howling convict fall. Then Bill was on him, sating his wild desire to smash and kill. When Hurlock no longer struggled, Bill scooped up the fallen gun and stumbled outside.

The twinkling lights of the town were in the distance. Rattling gun-fire crackled and died.

Nearby, Bill saw Hurlock's saddled horse. He swung astride and spurred out to the road. The cool night wind fanned his hot cheeks. Finally the roar of the aroused town pierced his throbbing ears.

Men in rigs and astride horses churned through the main street in utter confusion. Past lighted windows a crowd on foot dashed along the plank walk, yelling of the bank holdup. Yonder in front of the saloon the posse of milling riders roared out of town.

Realization that he was too late was like a knife-thrust. He was in front of the boarding house when he heard Madge Holcombe call to her father. Bill turned to see Jeff Holcombe carrying the limp burden of a little girl into the house. Yammering, excited townspeople were crowding around him.

Madge screamed, "Hurry, Dad!"

Bill lit down, shouldering his way through the yard. Above the bedlam he heard a man say, "Madge was just buckboardin' into town with her little sister as Colson's men was fleein'. One of the outlaws shot her. . . ."

Another man cried, "Doc Pierson's killed. Ain't another doctor in thirty miles."

Bill reached the doorway, deaf to the

clamoring angry shouts behind him. On a sofa he saw Lucy, her eyes closed, the front of her dress stained red. She looked as if she were dead, lying there, with old Jeff Holcombe and Madge bending over her. A terrified woman, carrying a pan of water and strips of cloth, came in from the kitchen.

"I'll ride for help!" Holcombe said huskily. "She's got to have a doctor."

"I'll do the best I can, Mister Holcombe," the woman with the bandages quavered. "The bullet's got to come out. It'll take a doctor to do that. Telegraph to—"

"The telegrapher's murdered."

Madge and her father saw Bill in the doorway then. Dried blood streaked his face from a gash across his temple. He looked like a corpse, all but his eyes, with a six-shooter in one hand at his side.

"I'll get a doctor, Holcombe," Bill said grimly.

Madge's tear-blurred eyes clung to his. One hand was pressed to her throat.

"You can't ride," Madge said.

Bill kept his eyes on the girl, even though he addressed her father. All he knew was that Lucy needed help.

"I can telegraph, Holcombe. Mebby I was a skunk for playin' Bellinger's game as long as I have been. But it was the only chance I had of savin' my brother's life. You don't sabe everything now, but you will. My name is not Smith; it's Bill Lawton, escaped convict. I came here to find Vance Colson, who framed us to hell years ago."

Bill turned, strode toward the street. It seemed almighty queer to him that the crowd of people should make a lane for him. Behind him he heard the murmur of voices, the tromp of feet, but not once did he look back.

AT the railroad station he went inside, where a small knot of men hovered around a blanket-covered body. At the telegraph table Bill bent over the keys. His slender fingers moved swiftly, surely, as he clicked out a frantic call for help.

He didn't see the men standing tense at his back. The word was received.

An answer came back from Pyote, thirty miles away: "Doctor, nurses coming. Call going through for the Rangers. If telegrapher Kane is dead who is calling?"

Bill answered: "Bill Lawton."

He faced the crowd, said: "A doctor is comin' by hand-car. Also the Rangers."

The cheers that rose seemed to mock him. Word raced ahead of him as he went down the street toward the center of town. As he passed the boarding house he saw Jeff Holcombe and called out, his voice carrying: "Tell Madge I'm not all snake."

Silence claimed the town that minutes ago was in panic. The false-fronts gave back the echo of marching boots and jangling spurs. Men were seeking vengeance tonight. With a leader, the suppressed basin cowmen were set to smash the yoke of Bellinger's dominance.

Bill pushed through the batwing doors of the Diamond Palace Saloon. Staring faces turned toward him, but only two men were clear to Bill, and big Derrick Bellinger was one of them.

The oil man stood paralyzed, his heavy-jowled face a picture of blank amazement.

"Hurlock's dead, Bellinger," Bill said steadily. "I'm makin' my first arrest. It's you! I've nothin' to shield now. I've sent out word that I'm Bill Lawton, an' the Rangers are on their way. Your scheme to steal Caballo Basin is shot to hell, Bellinger. You, Dutch Arnt an' Vance Colson, are payin' for the bank robbery an' the murders—"

Bellinger snarled, stabbing desperately for his gun as, with a throaty yowl, Dutch Arnt dived over the bar for his shotgun. Bill's first shot caught the saloon

proprietor in mid-air. Then the room seemed to rock as roaring guns smothered the yells of trapped men.

Some of the oil-field workers, unaccustomed to handling guns, drew their weapons and fired blindly. Others, sensing defeat, stampeded toward the rear door. A bullet speared through Bill's left shoulder, dropping him to one knee. Then he was surging forward, smashing Bellinger to the floor with lead from his bucking gun. Vaguely he knew that other men were pouring in behind him.

Out of the hellish din sheered Jeff Holcombe's savage bellow: "Kill 'em—wipe 'em clean as you go! There's a new law in Jamul!"

THE fight in the saloon stopped as quickly as it had begun. Outside there was sporadic firing, the howls of jubilant cowmen who had at last found the courage to fight. On the sawdust floor lay the bodies of Bellinger and four oil toughs, dead. Across the top of the bar Dutch Arnt lay, moaning.

Through the swirling smoke Bill lunged forward. He suddenly saw old Mort McCarthy at his side, smoking six-shooter in one hand, eyes bright with the glory of a man who has found himself. Other men crowded close as Bill lifted Dutch Arnt's head.

The saloonman was dying. He whimpered: "*Mein Gott!* I tell, Lawton!"

"Where's Colson an' his bunch?"

"At der upper end of Black Hawk Canyon."

Bill led the way out to the horses at the hitch-pole. McCarthy, Jeff Holcombe and another cowman flanked him as the cavalcade roared out of town. They passed the now silent and deserted oil field and roared on across the dark basin.

Afterward, he was never able to recall the details of that ride. It was as if he were swept along on a mighty tide of violence, through arroyos and high brush, then into the boulder-strewn, canyon-gashed hills. He tried to keep the wind in his face, knowing it was a race against his ebbing strength.

High sheer walls echoed to the beat of flying hoofs. Mort McCarthy surged into the lead, twisting and angling through a gorge at a gait no sane man would try. Then Bill saw the yellow eye of a campfire and heard the cowmen yell.

The men in that ring of fire-light scattered like quail. Rifle-flame stabbed the night and two horses went down in that mad charge. One fleeing figure loomed from the others in Bill's line of vision. Bill spurred up, laughing at the slugs which were meant for him, praying for his luck to hold.

Vance Colson came to his knees, whirled, fired—and missed. Colson's square-jawed face was stamped with hate and surprise.

Bill fired as he went hurtling from the saddle. With the last iota of his strength he closed with Colson. As both reeling men fell, Bill found the renegade's throat and clung on, squeezing.

"Talk, Colson, you damned double-crossin' snake! I don't want to kill you. I want you to go to the prison-hell where you sent Jimmy an' me—"

Vance Colson's frantic plea for life was that of a whipped, craven thing. His words meant vindication for Bill and Jimmy Lawton. But to Bill, at that moment, they ebbed into nothingness as he slumped into oblivion. . . .

Voices came first into Bill's consciousness. When he looked up he saw Jeff Holcombe and the basin warriors bending over him. Gone was the wrath from their eyes.

Jeff Holcombe's voice was shaken with deep emotions when he spoke. "Vance Colson's our prisoner, Bill. There is only one future for him, an' that's the prison-hell. He's talked an' talked plenty. You've

paid your debt—an' taught us all something to boot. By God, Lawton, you an' your brother will go free. Caballo Basin will know a new peace. . . ."

Bill tried to absorb what Holcombe told him. He pictured the joy in Jimmy's eyes when the news of what had happened came to him. . . .

The doctor from Pyote spent most of the night with Lucy Holcombe and Bill. When Bill awoke, warm sunlight was streaming across his bed, there at the boarding house. Like a benediction, it touched Madge Holcombe's face as she bent over him. She was smiling and crying at the same time, like a girl who has prayed and seen her prayers come true.

She murmured, "Things are going to be different now in Caballo Basin, Bill. If there is oil out there it will belong to the cowmen. If there isn't, it won't matter, for the bank money is recovered."

"Lucy?" Bill asked weakly.

"I just left her bedside. She's going to live, Bill. . . . And so are you. We'd like to have you stay in Jamul, and go on being sheriff. With lots of sunlight and good food and rest your brother will get well out here. What do you say, Bill?"

"You want me to stay?" he asked.

Her misty eyes met his, flooded with joyous promise.

THE END

THE BOOTHILL STRANGER

The thin red scar on the scalp of Coyote Creek's fancy boss marked the end of the Stranger's bloody, ten-year trail. . . . But he forgot to figure on a tough youngster's mistaken loyalty, a honkytonk girl's terrified scream—and a hangtree, specially reserved for nosey saddle-drifters. . . .

By ARTHUR LAWSON

STOPS OFF

Complete novel of a lawless town

The top of the man's head was hardly three feet from the Stranger, the crescent scar on the customer's growing bald spot very plain.

Sometime, many years ago, this man had almost been scalped.

The Stranger scrambled for the soap, lathered himself throughly. He rinsed himself off, took the towel from the rack and shoved it under the bathtub. Then he yelled for the barber.

"Jake! Hey, Jake. Bring me a towel. You expect me to stand around in here until the breeze dries me off?"

On coming in, as was his custom, the Stranger had made a mental photograph of the place. There were two barber chairs and a couple of benches along the side walls where customers could wait without being obliged to expose their backs. A glass-fronted cupboard against the partition, near the door to the baths,

held rows of gilt-monogrammed shaving mugs. On the other side of the door were shelves loaded with towels. To bring one, the barber would have to take three steps.

The barber muttered something that the stranger did not catch. The thin man in the chair made a mumbled answer. Spurs rattled. The door slammed open and a burley gent sporting two guns stepped up to the threshold.

"Say, you! We don't want any bellerin' around here, Savvy?"

The Stranger shivered. "It's a hell of a place," he said. "No towels. No service."

The gunman studied him carefully, though briefly, for future reference.

"If it's service yuh want—maybe I can pervide it!"

Yanking a towel from the shelves, he flung it in the Stranger's face. Then he banged the door, rattled his spurs back to the bench where he had been sitting.

The Stranger smiled thinly. He had found out what he wanted to know. The man with the scar on top of his head was plenty important in this new railroad town of Coyote Creek. Big stuff—big enough to travel with a body guard. Big enough to make slaves of all the little people like Jake the Barber.

It all made a set-up that looked like unexpected luck to the Stranger. Slim Bill Beecham had been that sort of hombre—his boots always polished, his nails always trimmed even when he was riding gun for the Turkey Track spread down at Dry Wells. And Slim Bill had once almost been scalped . . .

It was the night Bill had raided Smoky Jackson's wagon train. Bill wanted to know where Smoky had hidden the fortune in gold that it was rumored he had buried some place. But Smoky would not talk. And when Bill resorted to torture, Charlie Pale Horse, Smoky's Indian helper had gone berserk, nearly scalped him with a skinning knife, before they shot Charlie down and flung him out on the prairie for the coyotes.

The Stranger had arrived too late to help, for Slim Bill was gone. And the old muleskinner had clung to life only long enough to tell his friend the story.

The Stranger had been searching a long time for Slim Bill Beecham.

Not even the rustling of the leaves had hinted that Bill was in Coyote Creek, at the western terminus of the new Western Pacific line . . .

CAREFULLY timing his dressing, the Stranger was ready when the blonde, the boy and the barber finished with their customer. He buckled his cartridge belt around his waist, patted the black-butted, black-holstered Colt that nestled against his thigh. He stuck his Stetson on his head at a wild angle and stepped out of the bathroom into the barber shop. A shaving mug with the initials B. B. stood on the shelf before the mirror. The Stranger's ears buzzed.

Two guards, standing on either side of the man who had just been shaved, eyed him with open suspicion. The man, himself, however, paid no attention to the newcomer, for he was too busy paying off a five-dollar bill to the blonde and appreciating her smile. The little boy was looking up hopefully for a tip.

"Plenty of 'Pache Oil, once a day," the barber was saying. "Rub it in good and you'll never have to worry, Mister Beeman. You've got a fine head of hair there."

From Beecham to Beeman was not much of a jump. The Stranger said: "H'lo, Scalp."

The two guards dropped hands to guns, side-stepping away from their boss as they did so. Scalp Beeman's pink, freshly-shaved face turned deathly white. The barber, wise in the ways of the frontier, dropped to the floor like a poleaxed steer. The girl screamed, and the red-headed

kid's mouth opened wide in amazement.

"How you been, Scalp?" the Stranger asked. "Haven't seen you since the old Turkey Track days. Looks like you been doing fine."

He had never seen Scalp Beeman before, had only heard him described—first by Smoky Jackson whom he had found dying beside his wagon train, and later by men who had ridden with Slim Bill along the dark trails and given him the name of Scalp.

Yet there was little doubt that this was his man.

Color was coming back to Scalp Beeman's roundish face. He said: "Stranger, I'm afraid—"

At the same time he nodded shortly. He was looking past the Stranger into the mirror, and his eyes gave him away.

The Stranger's right hand vanished under his coat front, came out again in the same slick movement. The nearest guard had intercepted his boss's signal. But the Stranger's first shot took him in the chest before he could even line up his gun, and smashed him through the barber shop's front window. It sent him sprawling in a shower of glass onto the boardwalk.

Now the second guard shot from his hip. His bullet angled into the case of mugs, shattering the glass door. Then the Stranger's lead found his heart and he folded up silently.

The girl had stopped screaming, too appalled to even breathe. The boy had ducked behind her. The barber lay on the floor with his arms over his head as shelter from the flying glass. And the man who had once almost been scalped raised his soft, manicured hands.

"I don't carry a gun," he said thickly. "You got the wrong man in me. I never even heard of this Scalp hombre."

The Stranger reached down swiftly for the six-shooter the first guard had dropped, tossed it over to Beeman.

"Use this one," he suggested. "It's got six bullets in it. Two more than I've got in my gun."

Beeman let the gun strike his chest and drop to the floor. He backed away toward the outside door.

"Pick it up, Scalp," the Stranger snapped.

The man bent slowly to reach for the gun. The Stranger saw his hands coming down, his left cutting inward toward the row of pearl buttons on his vest. It was an old trick, but it was a good way of getting at a shoulder holster while your opponent was busy watching your other hand.

Then something happened which neither of them had forseen. The blonde girl suddenly snapped out of her daze and flung herself on the Stranger. He tried to jump aside but his boots slipped on the broken glass littering the floor and he went to his knees as she struck him. She was all over him at once, kicking screaming, scratching and biting like a wild *tigrita*. He struggled for his feet, trying to get this she-devil off his back. But, when he finally caught her wrist and twisted her away, a blow struck his head that knocked him back to the floor.

He felt broken crockery falling around him and heard the boy yelling. But he couldn't see anything, for a red haze shot with bright sparks clouded the barber shop. The kid had attacked him with Scalp Beeman's shaving mug.

The Stranger fought blindly. Suddenly the boy and the blonde fell away, and he could stand groggily with his back against the wall looking out over the prostrated barber, shaking his head to clear it.

The man for whom the Stranger had ransacked a hundred mining camps and cowtowns was gone!

In his place was a younger gent with a marshal's badge on his suspenders and half the town behind him to back his play.

The Stranger lifted his hands. "Eve-

ning, Marshal," he said. "Just a little clean fun."

"Just a little too clean for me," the marshal said grimly. "Toss over your hawg-leg, Stranger. I've got a nice cell down to the jail I think you'll like playing in."

"My God!" somebody in the crowd gasped. "Look—he got 'em both!"

CHAPTER TWO

The Stranger Hunts a Scalp

SLOWLY, the Stranger shook his head. The bump where the boy had hit him with the mug stung meanly. But his eyesight had cleared.

"Sorry, Marshal," he said softly. "I'd like to oblige, but I'm kind of partial to to this gun."

The lawman was advancing cautiously. In a brief, hurried glance, the Stranger sized up the tight spot into which he had gotten himself. To his left, between where he stood and the door to the baths, the girl held her fisted knuckles against white teeth. Her eyes were wide with fright, her hair dishevelled, and dress ripped off one white shoulder. The boy beside her clung to the handle of the broken mug while he watched the marshal with fascinated admiration. The barber sat amidst the wreckage. And everywhere, it seemed, were people—crowding up to the broken window, crushing against the doorway.

The marshal's six-shooter was very steady. "Maybe you're more partial to your hide," he said evenly.

"These hombres drew on me," the Stranger told him. "I had to take their lead or give them mine."

The blonde said sharply: "He's lying. He didn't give them a chance."

The marshal paused, the muscles on his cheeks hardening. From the floor, the barber piped up: "He ambushed 'em, Marshal."

The mob nodded as one man. This was more like it. No gunnie could knock over both of Beeman's expert guards without stacking things heavily against him.

The Stranger's eyes glowed. Beeman certainly had this town tied up. And he had that girl chained to him with links much stronger than fear. It was odd, he reflected shortly, what a girl will see in some men. . . .

The crowd was shoving closer, the marshal putting out a hand to take the Stranger's gun. But this time, there was no broken glass under the Stranger's boots to throw him. And long ago he had learned when to fight, when to retreat, and when to surrender. He said, suddenly sharply:

"Ask Beeman!"

The marshal blinked. Beeman had vanished before he had gotten here. Taking advantage of the momentary hesitancy, the Stranger smashed down with his gunbarrel, clipping the marshal's wrist with a blow that sent the lawman's weapon flying in a wide arc. In the same motion, he jumped behind the blonde and the kid and kept right on through the bathroom door. He climbed through the window, aiming to make a run for the railroad and the stockyards.

He had figured it to the last fine point. Shock from the blow would put the marshal out of the battle for precious seconds. The excitement which had packed everyone in town so tightly around the front of the barber shop, would delay pursuit. In the meantime, with a little luck thrown in, he could reach the shelter of a string of stock cars. He might even be able to lose himself in the stockyards.

He ran hard, ducking behind the nearest car as a bullet whistled past his head. Dropping low, he shot carefully for the first man to pour from the alley. His bullet kicked sand against the man's legs, sending him scurrying back for shelter. The sound of the shot roused the boogery

steers in the car and, when some sharpshooter tried to pick off his legs under the car and clipped one of the beeves, the whole carload of cattle rose in one agonized roar.

The Stranger ran along to the sliding door. He squatted down, looking under the car and put a slug into the frame of the barber shop window out of which the marshal was climbing. He smiled thinly as the lawman tumbled back inside. But the rear of the mob were forcing those in the alley out into the open.

He straightened. The boogered beeves would kick and gore themselves to death in that crowded car, and the panic was spreading down the line. He could do something to help them—and maybe himself!

He shot off the lock, slammed the door and ran on to the next car. Cattle tumbled out, righted themselves and started with one solid bellow toward town. The next load went after them, and the third followed in their dust. The Stranger ran on, stopping to reload, to squat down and fire high into the alley in the hope that it might stop the men there. But some of them were already in the yards, running toward the cars.

He went on. He couldn't go back, for the crazed, wild longhorns he had freed had split into two streams. One set was headed back to home and Texas—the other for the barber shop alley and Main Street. Ahead of him, beyond the station, an engine had been making up a string of freights.

The engineer had stopped his locomotive at the sound of shooting and both he and the fireman were looking out the cab. The brakeman had ducked behind the last stock car and tried to club him as he came by. But the Stranger had seen him and cut far enough away so that the brakeman missed.

Now, on his side of the cars, the cattle were coming, heads low, tails high. On the other side, the first of the mob were coming in fast.

Between himself and the locomotive was an open space of maybe fifty yards. Behind were the steers. To his right the town. To the left the open prairie. And the sun was still an hour from setting. He had his choice of running until the stampede or the men caught up with him—or of making a stand-off fight from the top of the stock cars.

The Stranger chose to run. . . .

HE zig-zagged across that open space, firing toward town as he ran. The fireman had disappeared, but the engineer still watched the battle. Figuring he would rather be laid out with a shovel than a bullet or trampled by the longhorns, the Stranger held his course for the locomotive. As he passed the tender, he took his last shot at the pursuers, whirled around and lined his gun on the engineer.

"Mister," he reached for the handrail, panting, "I need a ride—badly!"

He swung up, purposely letting his gun sag so that it did not point right at the railroad man. The first of the steers roared by, their sharp horns only inches from the seat of his fine black pants. The engineer laughed.

"Then you'll have to drive her yourself, feller. Nobody ever took a train from me yet."

The Stranger clambered in, expecting the shovel at any second. He was surprised when he looked right along the barrel of a sawed-off shotgun in the squatting fireman's hands. His pistol clattered to the floor of the cab.

"Okay, boys," the Stranger grinned. "I quit!"

This was better than fighting it out. If the fireman did not get gun-fever and let go with a load of buckshot, if the marshal kept the crowd from lynching him, he would land in jail with a whole hide, a murder count, and at least ten years addi-

tional for busting up that trainload of beef. But jails, the Stranger had learned long ago, could always be peeled off a man.

"By golly!" The fireman emphasized it with a nod of his head, "you sure put up a pretty scrap, mister. I hate to bust it up."

"Look at them cattle go!" The engineer slapped his thigh. "Is that a beautiful sight!"

"Beeman's!" the fireman explained shortly. "And are you going to get hell!"

The Stranger's grin widened. "You boys missed the best part of the show. You should have seen Beeman when I plugged his two gunnies."

"Both of 'em?" the fireman exclaimed.

The Stranger nodded. "Beeman wouldn't play. Said he didn't have a gun. A blonde and a red-headed kid busted it up."

The fireman uncocked his shotgun, laid it on his seat and opened the firedoor.

"You heard what he said, George."

The engineer yanked his whistle. "Pick up that sixshooter, Stranger, and make her look realistic. We're going away from here."

The fireman heaved a scoop of coal; the engineer slid the throttle lever. The great wheels spun on the rails. Boogered, crazy cattle still streamed by the north side of the locomotive. The Stranger reached for his gun. "Santy Claus!" he said.

"Santy Claus, hell," the engineer came back. "If you plugged Beeman's two little friends, I figure you'll plug Beeman, given the chance. Man—look at them dogies!"

The Stranger jammed shells into the cylinder. He glanced out toward town. The tails of one stream of cattle were vanishing up the barber shop alley. Men were pouring out the other alleys, back doors of false-fronted buildings, all heading for the railroad yards.

The engine was moving slowly. As it picked up speed, a man leaped for the handrail. How he had gotten through the stampede, the Stranger could not hope to guess, but he sent him spinning with a bullet that did more damage to his nerves than to his skin.

The Stranger leaned out the other side just in time to see the marshal grab for the tender. Except for this lawman, the locomotive was now outdistancing the crowd. Only the longhorns were keeping up with them.

His teeth clenched, he lined his Colt for a spot just over the marshal's skull, where his bullet would puncture the lawman's hat and put the fear of lead into him.

The marshal caught the rung he had been reaching for and the movement of the locomotive yanked him off his feet. For a second, he hung there, clinging with one hand, holding his gun with the other. The Stranger held his fire, for he had observed the interesting fact that the marshal was dangling by the hand whose wrist he had smashed back there in the barber shop.

Slowly his fingers gave way. Then he fell, rolled over three times before he came to a stop. To make things look good the Stranger kicked sand in his face with a well-placed bullet. But the laugh that was rising in him died stillborn.

A brown-haired girl in a bright red dress was running from the depot right through a knot of milling cattle. She went to her knees by the lawman, flung her arms around his shoulder. Then the train screamed around a bend, leaving the town.

"Looks like everybody's got a girl," the Stranger commented coolly, "but me."

The fireman grunted as he heaved another scoop into the fire.

"Me—uh—an' George, got two in every town."

"An' we'll give 'em all to you," the engineer said, "when you bring us Beeman's scalp."

CHAPTER THREE

Two Girls—and a Scattergun!

THEY took him twenty miles out to Coyote Creek, set him down near a ranch where they said he should be able to get a horse to take him back to town.

"Ol' Jerry Diggs owns that spread. Half blind and as deaf as your landlady when you're tellin' her you can't pay the rent. An' ornery!" the engineer explained.

"If he ketches yuh," the fireman suggested, "tell him you're hunting Beeman's hide and he'll give yuh *all* his horses."

The fireman said, "Stranger, when you're set to jump Beeman, just send a little boy to tell us about it."

The Stranger smiled his thanks, slipped from the cab, waved to the boys as they put the engine into reverse and chugged back to Coyote Creek.

It was dark now. But when the locomotive showed up in town the marshal would almost certainly organize a posse to search him. The Stranger, however, planned on being some place else when that manhunt started.

He stalked the little cabin where Jerry Diggs lived. So far, everyone he had talked to hated Beeman. Beeman's mob, the fireman swore, had rolled him one payday in the Prairie Flower Saloon. Beeman, himself, the engineer claimed, had waylaid him one night in the yards and lifted the entire proceeds of a little trade in cattle he had consummated on the side. Beeman was poison. But the law had not been able to catch up with him.

As the Stranger looked through a window at old Jerry Diggs who was eating a supper of beans, bacon and bannock, he wondered what Beeman had done to him. He knocked hard on the door. The old-timer answered with a cocked shotgun.

"Oh, what you want, feller? If you're one of Beeman's crooks—"

"I'm startin' a one-man war against Beeman," the Stranger explained. "Somebody bushwhacked my horse."

Deaf Jerry Diggs shook his head sadly. "Ain't been a bullwhacker in these parts since the railroad come through," he informed the Stranger. "Beeman chased 'em all off. Set an' eat?" He hung up the scattergun, still cocked, over a longhorn skull nailed to the wall.

The Stranger accepted. The food was good. He ate rapidly, trying to explain what he had come for, hollering: "I wanta buy a horse!"

"Yuh want thuh second course? Welcome, stranger." Jerry Diggs dished out another helping from his meagre store.

The Stranger tried again, yelling until his voice rasped, and succeeded finally in explaining that he wanted a horse so that he could go back to town to kill Bill Beeman. The half blind eyes of little old Jerry Diggs took on a bright light.

"Stranger," he said. "Beeman's got all my best hosses. Lent me money on 'em, then sent one of his boys out to toss a bundle of dynamite into my barn. He blamed it on the railroad, took all my good stock, an' left three buzzard-parts. By gum, I'd go right along with you and help you tack up Beeman's hide to the fence. But I can't see worth shucks, and that dynamite blew my ears all to hell. Take your choice, stranger, an' if that hoss gives out, come back for another."

THE STRANGER'S lips were pressed in a grim line as he rode back to town forking an old crowbait that was Jerry Diggs private town horse. He had gone hardly four miles, however, when the locomotive headlight hove into view. Dropping off the horse he cut away from the rails, waited until the engine had passed. The whistle was blowing wildly though the train was not going very fast.

Behind the tender were two flatcars loaded with horses and men.

His two friends, the fireman and the engineer, were still playing ball with him by delaying the pursuit.

He rode hard after the train had gone by, keeping to the right of way as the shortest distance to his destination. After while, once again he had to pull off the tracks as the engine came backing up, pushing the now empty flatcars.

He let the train steam by, then rode hard and swung off onto the cowcatcher. The locomotive picked up speed when his horse went running off over the prairie without a rider—and the Stranger swore that at the first opportunity he was going to buy as many drinks as two square hombres could stow away.

He hoped they would go right on through town, but the locomotive slowed and he had to drop off.

He crept along a string of boxcars on a siding. Where they ended by the depot, he straightened his shoulders, set his Stetson at a cocky angle, and walked on as if he owned the place. If he expected to clean up his gun-chore before the posse came home he had to go right ahead with it.

The brown-haired girl in the red dress was sitting on the depot platform by a window that opened onto the agent's office. When the Stranger emerged from the gloom she was looking down the tracks as if expecting her lawman lover.

He smiled blandly at her, and said: "Evening, ma'am."

She smiled back, very prettily. That marshal, if he lived long enough, would sure be a mighty lucky hombre.

"Evening, stranger."

There was no enmity or recognition in her dark eyes. He started on, thankful for small shreds of luck. If only he could get to Bill Beeman as slickly, everything would be fine. But she froze him suddenly when she said, "Say, mister, if you went out with the posse, howcome you're back so soon?" Her smile, the Stranger decided, might mean anything. His eyes, bleak and expressionless, studied her. He shook his head slightly, grinned.

"I wasn't with the posse," he said. "Had a little gun-chore of my own to clean up." That old uneasy feeling was coming back to him, prickling along his spine.

Her face was away from him when she asked: "Think they'll catch the hombre who plugged Beeman's guards?"

"Wouldn't be surprised," he said. "What are they chasing him for, ma'am? To give him a medal?"

He wondered if she was rawhiding him. She said, her voice intense: "They should!"

Had Beeman's march to power crossed her life, too?

The telegraph key clicked madly. The girl listened, and he followed her inside the office. She answered with a fast Morse code. The Stranger's uneasiness sent the prickles up to the base of his skull. There was more talk over the wires, and another answer. When it stopped, the girl smiled up at him.

To lead her on, he asked: "You couldn't tell me when the next train leaves for the East, could you? Or don't you run this joint?"

"There's a freight at midnight, if you like the rods, and a passenger out at noon tomorrow." Her dark eyes glistened. "Stranger, I've run this joint, as you call it, ever since my old man got shot right over his ticker the morning the pay train was robbed. He was telegraphing the news to Flat Creek." She looked straight at him, and he believed her. "That was the marshal on the wire. He's up to Flat Creek, now with half the posse. The other half is headed this way. Says he hasn't found the killer, but old Jerry Diggs swore he had headed that way. Wanted

to know if there was any news from this end."

Desperately the Stranger wanted to ask her what she had told the lawman. But he shrugged off his curiosity. After all, she was the marshal's girl, and he had not a doubt in the world that she had recognized him. Well, he would have to take the bad luck with the good—that was all.

She followed him out to the platform. There she said: "Funny Beeman didn't go with the posse. Guess he's too scared to leave the Prairie Flower Saloon with his best guards in the undertaker's."

"Ma'am," the Stranger said, "it sure is funny!"

HE WENT away from there, his spine tingling and the roots of his hair feeling cold. Trying to convince himself that the girl had not given him away, that she had not talked him into a trap, he headed straight for the Prairie Flower Saloon.

There were few people on the streets; the railroad crew was camped several miles west of town and most of the cowboys were out with the posse. It would have left him feeling good, except for the fact that the girl had apparently told him everything that he needed to know. She had talked mighty slick. She had given him just the information he had to have—or the misinformation that might help her man run him down.

Main Street was deserted. The only horses at the racks were before the Prairie Flower—three fine roans carrying tooled saddles, with a youngster half-buried under a great Stetson watching them. Later on they might be useful, the Stranger observed.

"Say, Bub," the Stranger greeted. "Would you mind running down to the ah—uh—"

The boy had glanced up. Red hair curled down over his forehead. He was the kid from the barber shop.

"Or are you busy?" the Stranger ended, stepping very close so that the sitting boy had only a worm's eye view of him.

"I'm sorta watching these hosses," the kid said, craning his neck. "Only I'm damned if I know why I'm watching two of 'em."

The Stranger's only desire at the moment was to get away from there. He looked down his nose, said: "Okay, Bub, forget it. Just had a little chore for you."

"Well—I might get it in," the kid persisted. "Two of these hosses belong to a couple dead men. The other is Slim Bill Beeman's. And I don't figure any of 'em will be riding tonight."

Hastily, the Stranger dropped a silver dollar on the kid's lap.

"Then run over to the Okay Corral for my horse. Big black gelding with a white star between his ears. And I'll give you another buck when you come back."

The kid grabbed the dollar, jumped to his feet. "Thanks, mister!" He ran off down the street. But, as he pushed through the swinging doors to the Prairie Flower, the Stranger heard the kid's heels slide to a sudden halt. The boy had hesitated. The Stranger stepped on inside. The kid turned around and ran for the depot.

The Stranger's lips thinned as he strode up to the bar. Half a dozen girls sat around one end of the big room with no company except a couple of old men. The bartender stood sleepily before the mirror, his bald head glistening. He looked hopeful at the sight of a new customer.

The Stranger said: "I might as well have brought a brass band. Make it Old Grey Mule, Gus."

The barkeeper produced a bottle, squinted uncertainly at the Stranger while he tried to figure out that remark.

The Stranger lifted his glass, saw the reflections of three girls in the mirror.

They were coming up to him, flanking him, trying to appear as if they were not each racing the others for his attention. In the lead was the barber shop blonde who had jumped him. By her expression he knew that she had not yet recognized him, but he realized that such a situation could not last long. If he was going to retreat he had better do it now.

A bit bitterly, he asked the bartender: "Does that old barber, Jake, come in here often?"

The barkeep shook a gloomy head. "After the ruckus down to his joint he come in and got so drunk we had to cart him out in a wheelbarrer. Guess he's still sleeping it off."

"Well, thank God for that," the Stranger said.

The blonde was nudging him. He looked around and down at her and smiled. Suddenly she screamed.

"I was just telling Gus, here," he said to her, "that I should have brought a brass band. But I guess I don't need it now."

The blonde's shrill scream rose again. "It's him! The Stranger!"

And the bartender quickly produced his riot gun. It was double-barrelled, big bored, sawed short, and loaded with buckshot . . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Hang-noose-History in the Making

THE STRANGER dropped. Buckshot plucked at the top of his Stetson. He had his Colt in hand before he hit the floor, and he fired twice right through the bar. The bartender grunted. The Stranger yelled:

"Toss over that scattergun or I'll —"

The blonde girl was running hard toward the end of the bar, making fast time despite the high-heeled red slippers. Over the top of the bar came the shotgun, and clattered like a broken rail on the floor beside the Stranger. The two other girls who had come up stood dumbly in the middle of the room. At the far end, the old men upset a table, hid behind it and fired blindly toward him while their girl friends scurried for the swinging doors.

The Stranger slapped a shot into the table top and followed the blonde girl, keeping his head low in case the bartender happened to produce another shotgun. The blonde skidded around the bar's end, he close behind her, his silver spurs buzzing like twin rattlers. The bartender stuck his head up, yanked it back down again when the Stranger fired, smashing a row of bottles behind the back bar and spraying Gus with glass and whisky.

But the blonde was quick on her feet. She got through the back door and slammed it behind her before the Stranger caught up with her. He smashed into it hard enough to splinter the lock—and abruptly found himself in darkness as thick as the bottom of a mine.

One of the old men had let go with a Comanche yell and shot out the lights in the main room. Back here was only blackness, the smell of stale beer and fresh packing cases, the sound of a girl's light feet climbing a jerry-built stairway.

The Stranger moved ahead cautiously. The girl struck a landing. Her heels clicked half a dozen times. A door opened, shut. And after that, the only sounds were the old men's war cries, the loud cursing of Gus, and the chuffing of the locomotive outside in the yards, heading away from town.

Groping blindly, the Stranger found the stairs, cat-footed up them, paused a moment, then took six short steps to his right. This, he figured, brought him close to the door the blonde had entered.

He did not know what he would find in that room, but he had a good idea that it would be Slim Bill Beeman, known

to him as Scalp Beecham. And Bill's hands would be busy holding guns trained on the doorway. Just stepping inside would be a quick and certain method of ending a promising career as a free-lance lawman. And, stepping inside is what they expected him to do. Otherwise, why would the girl have lured him up here?

The Stranger considered. The bartender was still in the front room. Obviously the store room was empty, or he would have been shot at when he was following the girl. It would be safe to light a match and look around—to find something that he could heave through the door to distract Scalp and his blonde tigress.

He scratched a match. Its light showed a landing with doors leading from it and a staircase coming up to it. It showed a stack of beer barrels and whisky cases below, and a couple of windows facing the railroad yards. But there was nothing at hand with which to knock down the door.

The match flickered. The faint odor of perfume drifted by. He turned his head and looked right into the wide blue eyes of Slim Bill's blonde.

She was standing with her back to the door that had been behind him. His half dozen steps had been too short to bring him up to it—and she had not gone through it. She was standing there with her little pearl-handled derringer pointed for a spot right between his eyebrows.

"Ah—" The breath went out of him.

"You won't take him!" she breathed. "You *won't.*"

Then she pulled the trigger.

HER eyes had blinked, telegraphing her move. The Stranger did not have time enough for dodging or knocking the gun out of her hand. But he snapped the lighted match right into her face and the involuntary movement away from it caused her to miss and sent her single bullet humming by his ear.

He followed, throwing an arm around her, and her sharp French heels went into action. She clipped his shin with a blow that sent a sharp stab of pain clear up to his belly. He tried to step away from the next one, tripped, and both of them fell hard. He hit the door with the back of his head and shoulders, she on top of him, and went right through the panel.

For a second, the Stranger did not know what had happened to him. And when it dawned on him, he wished that one second could have been protracted into eternity. He was half inside the room with the girl still hanging on and kicking like a locoed burro. A light burned somewhere and Slim Bill Beeman knelt near the doorway with a six-shooter in his hand, its muzzle not more than a foot from the Stranger's head. Slim Bill's expression was not a pleasant thing to see.

"Okay, Linda," Beeman said smoothly. "Get off, or you might get powder-burned."

The girl started to give him one final kick, then changed her mind and stepped haughtily back. Always conscious of herself, she automatically straightened up her hair and her spangly dress. And, in the moment between here and the hereafter, the Stranger briefly wondered if she had her costumes made especially so that they would always rip off one beautifully rounded white shoulder whenever she got into a ruckus.

"Go on, Scalp," he said, keeping his eyes on the girl, thinking what a pity it was she should put all her magnificent courage and brittle prettiness into defending a slug like Beeman. "Pull the trigger, Scalp. It was fun while it lasted."

Slim Bill was delaying. He reached into the Stranger's coat, lifted his six-shooter, discovered his shoulder holster

and took that gun, too. Then he rocked back on his heels.

"When I plug you," he said, "you're going to be lookin' at me—not at Linda."

"Then I'm not going to like it," the Stranger said.

He watched the girl, reflecting that he had made one major mistake when he first came to Coyote Creek. He had been in too big a hurry when he discovered his man right there in the barber shop. Instead of trying to shoot it out right there, he should have gotten acquainted with this Linda first.

She was vain, and being vain he could have worked on her vanity. Maybe he could have put her out of the picture first and then been free to go after Beeman. As it was, she had blocked him every time he had gotten within range of Beeman.

She caught his frank admiration, tried to hide the fact by glancing away.

"Go fetch the boys, Linda," Beeman said. "Tell 'em I'm ready."

"You better not let her out of your sight, Scalp," the Stranger suggested, "or you might get hurt. Looks like Linda does all your fighting for you."

She liked that. So did the Stranger. But Beeman snapped: "Fetch 'em, Linda."

She went away with a flirt of her hips as she stepped over the Stranger and out the doorway.

The Stranger sat up, deliberately keeping his back to Beeman. The six-shooter prodded his spine, and he knew that there was no way of getting it out without taking a bullet in its place. Beeman had him roped and hogtied—and Beeman's iron was in the fire.

The gunboss chuckled. "Mister, I don't know who you are or who sent you. But I do know what you're going to be—and that's a horse I got on you."

"Then I'll tell you something," said the Stranger, "and maybe you can make another horse of it. Ol' Smoky Jackson was like a daddy to me—and Charlie Pale Horse was my compadre. I came to finish the job Charlie started ten years ago."

Slim Bill Beeman's breath rasped. The Stranger went on, building a story on a foundation of fear. "And I'm glad to say that the kid and barber finally told the truth about our fracas. The marshal's gal relayed it to him on the telegraph. Told him about Charlie and Smoky. About other things. The engine just went out to pick him up and the posse."

Bill cursed: "Damn you, if it wasn't for me, that kid would of starved to death years ago. He knows it. You're lying about him."

"He knows now who killed his old man," the Stranger took a shot in the dark.

It hit home. The gun jabbed deeper into his backbone. "You're lying!" Bill repeated himself.

"Okay," the Stranger said. "I'm lying."

THE men were coming in quietly, tough, hard cases, two at a time. One pair told Bill that they had seen the Stranger talking to the girl at the depot. She had sent a message. The engine had gone east, and then they had followed him up to the saloon and waited.

Another couple had seen the Stranger talking to the boy who had run down to the station. Two more had seen the kid, later on, fetch a horse for the Stranger from the livery stable. And they had all congregated in the alleys around the Prairie Flower, awaiting further orders from their boss.

But Gus had gotten rattled when the girl screamed, and Linda had opened the wrong door in her excitement. They had almost spoiled the personal execution that Slim Bill Beeman had chosen to perform.

They lashed the Stranger's wrists behind his back, escorted him carefully down the dark stairs to the storeroom, and out to the horses. They tied his feet under the belly of his own mount, latigoed his hands behind the cantle, and ran two lead ropes to the horns of a couple of saddles. Then they all climbed aboard—all but Linda and Gus—and walked their horses down the dark rear alley toward the creek and a bosque of cottonwoods a few miles out of town.

They were hurrying as if impatient to get over with it, and the Stranger knew that their rush was caused by his remarks to Slim Bill Beeman in the room over the Prairie Flower Saloon. Beeman was not at all sure that he had been lying, and the boss of Coyote Creek wanted the lynching to be an accomplished fact when and if the time came to face the marshal.

Vaguely, as if in a dream, he heard the locomotive whistle far out over the prairie, and it brought a ghost of a smile to his lips. That same whistle had inspired the lie that hurried Beeman to the lynching party.

They were in the bosque now, all dismounted excepting the Stranger. One of the men had tossed a rope over a high cottonwood limb, and Beeman himself was close by to see that nothing went wrong.

Beeman scowled at the Stranger. The light of stars and a sickle moon shed a speckled glow on the creek's water.

"What's so damn funny?" Beeman insisted.

"Life!" Because it irritated his hangman, the Stranger smiled broadly. "History repeats itself, Scalp. One hanging tonight—another tomorrow. Sorry I won't be here to see it."

Beeman's scowl deepened. "Where's that rope?" he howled.

The hemp snaked down, and one of the men grabbed its free end. Beeman reached for it, then quickly bent a perfect hangman's knot with its full complement of thirteen turns.

The Stranger said: "Looks like you done it before, Scalp!"

"Bah!" Beeman said.

The locomotive whistled again. Beeman heard it this time. He slung the loop over the Stranger's head, yanked it tight with a savage jerk. The other end he tied around his own saddle horn.

"Stranger, I'm going to like this," Beeman said. "You're going to drop when your hoss runs out from under you. Then I'm going to give my cayuse the spurs and you'll go up so fast you'll think you're going to heaven."

The Stranger said nothing as Beeman mounted. Then the gun-boss leaned down from his horse to cut the rope that tied the Stranger's feet under the horse.

He hunched his head between his shoulders as the cords dropped from his ankles. Then, with sudden, violent force he kicked hard at Beeman's face. The big silver Mexican spur raked Beeman's cheek, sliced down, cut into Bill's fancy vest and stuck there. Slim Bill bellowed. His horse boogered. The rope hummed, yanking the Stranger out of the saddle.

He felt Bill's weight hanging from his spur. There was a sudden snap—and a red light, far off, across the creek, started waving back and forth.

CHAPTER FIVE

A New Boss for Coyote Creek

SLIM BILL BEEMAN'S horse circled, came back to sniff at his boss, standing there skeery and afraid of the strange object that dangled beside it. A white light was in the bosque, a screaming in the air, and Slim Bill's men were leaving as fast as their horses could leg it. Something had gone wrong there—

and slowly that fact permeated the Stranger's dazed mind.

First he felt the light blazing in his eyes, and the hollow scream. Then he became aware of the frightened horse near him and the discovery that he was not more than two feet off the ground. turning around and around like a side of beef at a barbeque. It was on one of those turns that the Stranger made a lucky grab with his bound hands. His fingers hooked in the saddle skirt of Slim Bill Beeman's horse.

The horse shied off, but the Stranger hung on. Painfully working backward along the saddle inch by inch, fighting to retain his consciousness, he reached the latigo. The white light that had flooded the bosque was turning bloody as he yanked at the strap, and the blood was full of bright specks of broken stars. He struggled with the latigo, found the courage to go on when the first loop loosened. Then, suddenly, he dropped to the ground.

The horse, freed of his saddle, forgot his master and ran away.

Still the rope tugged at the Stranger's neck, his breath coming as hard as if the air had turned to solid ice. He rolled over on his back and the knot scraped by his ear, slapped against his chin. But the change in position relieved the pressure on his throat and he gulped deep lungsful of air that brought the blood back pounding in his head.

He bent double. With his spur he hooked the rope that stretched out of sight above him and pulled down on it until the noose was no longer tight. He rolled onto his side, caught the rope in his hand, then hauled down another length of it. Now he could stand up with one foot on the rope. He bit his lip to drive away the dizziness, leaned over and shook his head until the noose slipped off.

He stepped off the rope, laughed as the saddle hit the ground beside him and the rope slithered down out of the tree like a dead snake. At first he was so pleased with just being alive he saw nothing strange in the light that flooded the grove. Then Slim Bill Beeman stirred, and the Stranger realized that hardly a minute had passed since Beeman had slipped the noose around his neck.

His kick had knocked out Beeman, and Beeman had fallen on the big Mexican rowell when its shank broke off. The bright light was neither heaven nor dawn. It was the headlight of the locomotive standing on the big bend of the creek—and the eerie screaming was its tied-down whistle.

Already, men who had jumped their horses from the flat cars to swim the creek, were clambering up the near side. They pounded past him, shouting as they went streaking into the night on the tails of Beeman's men.

Slim Bill shouted from the ground: "Get him!"

And the Stranger promptly sat on the small of Slim Bill's bony back.

"It's the marshal's men!" The Stranger's voice was like a buzz saw. "You'll talk, Scalp, or I'll finish the job that Charlie Pale Horse started on you. I'll finish it right now, Scalp!"

SLIM BILL BEEMAN talked, with his face to the ground and a Mexican rowel gouging a broken rib. A twelve-year-old, red-headed kid, hunkered there in the beam of the locomotive's headlight learned how his father had been killed for refusing to play along with Beeman's men.

An old-timer, so deaf he had to have an interpreter to shout at him, heard who had blown up his barn with a bundle of dynamite. A brown-haired girl heard how her father had been bushwhacked while telegraphing a warning that Beeman's men were going to wreck the train.

And a rather flossy-looking blonde girl, with tears in her blue eyes, heard the whole horrible story. It was she who had waved the red lantern to stop the train loaded with the marshal's men who had been summoned by the brown-haired girl and the red-headed youngster.

"I had to do it," she said bitterly, softly, more to herself than to anyone else. "You couldn't fight like a man, Slim Bill. You had to stack the cards. I had to do it, even if I loved you—because the Stranger's a better man than you."

The brown-haired girl took Linda's arm. "Come," she said kindly, "let's go back to the train."

Side by side the two walked off toward the locomotive.

There were men here to take care of Slim Bill Beeman now, so the Stranger stood up. The youngster came over to him, frankly admiring.

"Gosh, Stranger," he said, "when I told the marshal's gal to signal him that you'd come back to town, she sure got busy on that clicker! I seen some fellers follerin' you an' told her that, too. Boy, was she in a sweat! She sure gave me hell for bangin' you over the knob with that shavin' mug." The boy's eyes dropped. He studied the toes of his scuffed boots. "I wouldn't of done it—only I didn't know you was her friend."

The Stranger laughed. He did not even know the girl's name. "Forget it, kid. You taught me a lesson I should have learned long ago. Never let a little shaver get behind you in a barber shop."

The kid grinned, relieved.

"Now," the Stranger told him, "I've got to get out of here. I've an engagement with a blonde and a couple of railroading hooligans. Will you break the way for me, kid?"

The boy strove valiantly to cut a path through the press about them. Men were crowding up, the marshal with them, and the kid could not make any headway. The young lawman looked embarrassed as he held his hand out to the Stranger.

"I got to beg your pardon, Stranger. You sure done a job that needed doing. I'd feel obliged if you'd shake with me."

"Mister Marshal," the Stranger smiled. "I'd feel honored, too. Only my hands are tied behind my back and I'm damned if I can figure a way of getting them out front."

THE END

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CHAPTER ONE

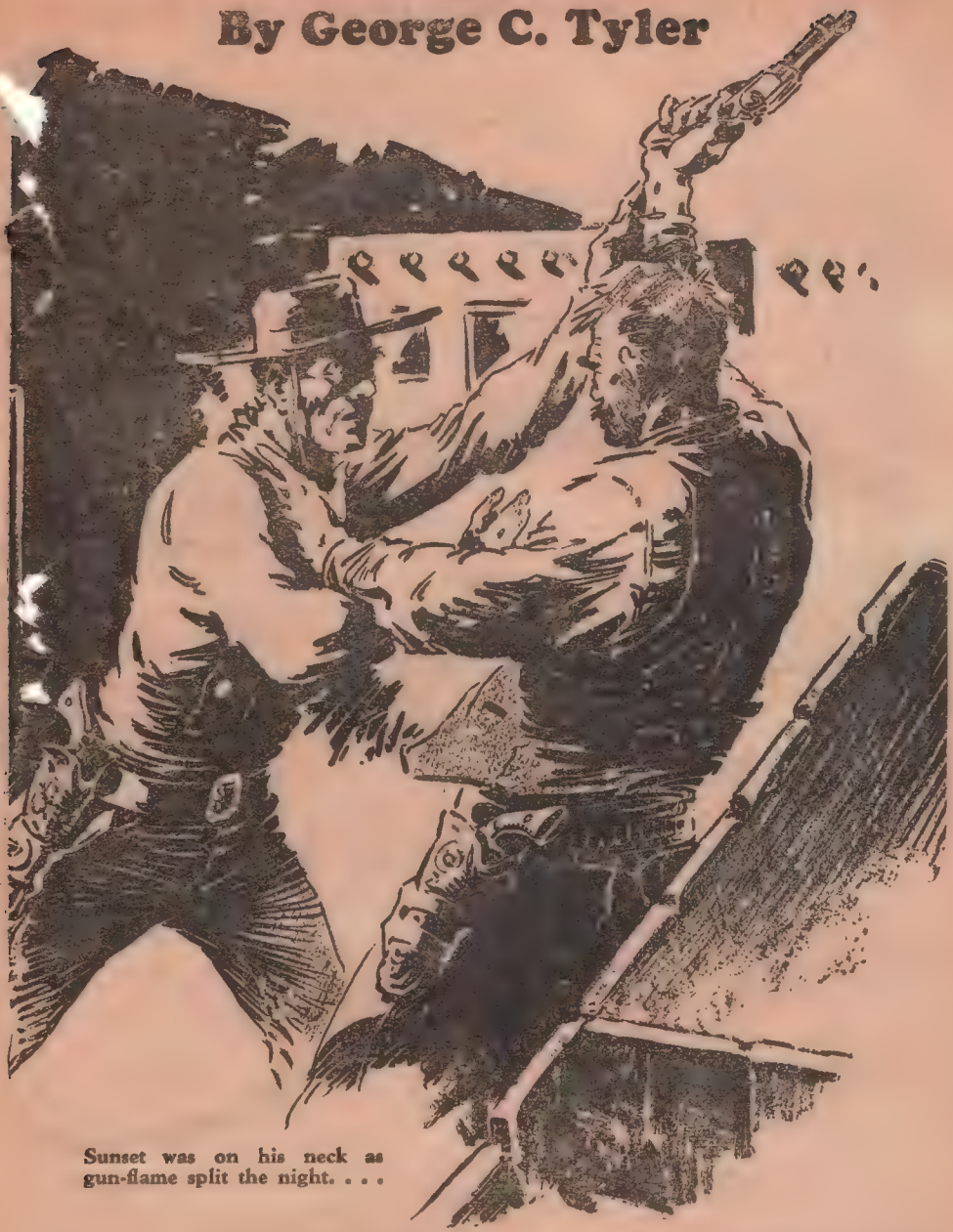
Grave-Digger for Lawmen

HIDALGO STREET crawled with heat devils. Flies droned against the shimmering silence. Only the foolish gringo was abroad under the noonday sun.

Johnny Bates watched the girl cross the dusty little plaza toward the mud post office; then gave his eye the run of Gun River's principal thoroughfare. Ribby

A "Johnny Bates and Sunset" novel

By George C. Tyler



Sunset was on his neck as gun-flame split the night. . . .

dogs were stretched on the sidewalk where the shadows fell. Cow-ponies drooped forgotten at the hitch rails. Red pepper flame splashed brown dobe walls.

Johnny looked at the buckskin in front of the Bienvenido Bar, and hard glints sparked in his narrowed gaze, like coals suddenly fanned to life. The horse was marked with a black line down its back—a *bayo coyote,* an animal of great endurance. The gear was ornamented with silver.

The horse belonged to Bill Rust, Border outlaw—and gravedigger for badge-toters.

Sunset Jones came out of the barber

shop and joined Johnny on the gallery. He smelled of bay rum.

"The folks have come," Johnny announced.

"What are they, Puritans?"

"The girl's white people; the old lady come over in the Mayflower." Johnny added a cautionary, "Watch your manners."

"Hell, all they got to do is smell this bay rum on me to sabe I'm refined."

Ellen Overstreet came from the post office and crossed the plaza. Johnny liked the way she walked, kinda like she might buy the town.

The girl was long-limbed and shapely. She moved with a pert swing of slim hips, shoulders back, eyes brightly curious at everything, and fired with adventure.

As she came up the steps, she flashed Johnny a smile that started his heart off at a lope. He guessed a man wouldn't have much trouble fallin' in love with a girl like that.

"This buckaroo is Sunset Jones," Johnny said.

Ellen Overstreet gave the lank cowboy a frank, deliberate scrutiny. Sunset was in his middle twenties. He was homely as rimrock, with a long, bovine countenance and sleepy eyes, set in a nest of crow's-feet.

The girl held out her hand. At the firm grip of her fingers, Sunset's face turned a dull red under his tan.

"What a grand name!" the girl exclaimed. "Sunset—named for the West."

"Folks done brand me Hezekiah," Sunset admitted sheepishly. "Reckon they had notions. They come from Vermont—Brattleboro."

"You and my grandaunt should have a lot in common," the girl said. "She's from the Green Mountain State—Putney."

A PRIM little old lady stalked from the hotel office. Johnny thought she could have stepped from an old-fashioned tintype. She wore a perky bonnet, secured with strings, and fingerless black glov[illegible] The crisp folds of her billowing [illegible] dress rustled like the leaves of a co[illegible]wood. She looked at Johnny and Su[illegible]set over the rims of her glasses.

This was Aunt Sophrony, the girl [illegible] them.

Sunset said, "Howdy, marm."

Johnny smiled at her and raised his hat. He didn't say anything.

"Hump!" Aunt Sophrony said. She looked them up and down. "What are you wearing those guns for?"

"Rattlesnakes is rabid this year, marm," Sunset said. His eye slid away toward the buckskin in front of the saloon.

"So you're a Bates," Aunt Sophr[illegible]y said, eyeing Johnny. "You one of the Maine Bateses?"

"Bangor—John Elijah."

"Did you know my brother?"

"He and my father used to drive cattle on the Jones and Plummer Trail."

Two men shouldered through the batwing doors of the Gay Caballero. One was tall, gaunt, hard-eyed. He moved with the smooth ease of a stalking panther. He swung the reins over the buckskin's head and stepped into the saddle. Two pearl-handled six-shooters sagged from his cartridge belt.

The butt of a Winchester stood out of the rifle boot under the stirrup-leather.

The other man had the desert-blackened skin of a Mexican, but his hair showed blond under his enormous sombrero; his eyes were a dull, crockery blue. He was short-legged, with the torso of a bull. A filled bandoleer belt was slung across his shoulder, and holstered guns hung at his thighs.

The pair passed the hotel. The taller man eyed the group on the gallery sharply; then his lips curled in a thin sneer, as the fingers of his right hand flicked upward in a mocking salute.

"Who are those ruffians, pray?" demanded Aunt Sophrony.

"That," said Johnny Bates, "is Bill Rust and his segundo, Sol Segrin."

"Bill Rust?" the girl cried incredulously, staring after them. The horsemen were turning in at the livery barn.

"As I live and die!" The little old lady hunted the placket of her billowing dress and finally extracted a crumpled letter, which she scanned, tight-lipped.

"My brother speaks of him in his letter," Aunt Sophrony said, frowning. "So that is him, is it? I declare!"

"We'll likely see plenty of that jigger," grunted Sunset.

"Tch-tch!" clucked the old lady. "The sassy thing, waving his hand, as bold as brass! For pity's sake, aren't there any policemen in this awful place?"

"There's the sheriff an' the Rangers," Johnny said. "But I hear Bill Rust is smart. Seems like there is a little trouble gettin' anythin' on him, though the Cattlemen's Association would like to. He's been runnin' too many cattle across the Rio Grande."

Ellen Overstreet's face grayed a little. "You are a stock detective, aren't you?"

"Brand-hawk," Johnny said. "On special assignment, an' at your service."

ELLEN OVERSTREET and her grandaunt had arrived in the Gun River country to take over the affairs of the Triangle O a week before.

The girl had been named for her grandmother, who had died that spring. Amos Overstreet had been sick and old, and, with the passing of his wife, there had been nothing to live for, it seemed, and he had followed her to the Range in the Sky two months later.

Johnny Bates knew that at one time the Triangle O had been a big outfit—not big like the King's or the Kenedy's—but with a hundred thousand acres of pasture there in the brush, and no one knew how many cattle. But drought years and rustlers had crowded the Triangle O to the wall. Johnny guessed there wasn't much left.

Aunt Sophrony gave him the letter from her brother. It was at once a last will and farewell. Certain passages stood out sharp and clear. ". . . I'd like fer Ellen to keep the iron. . . . Ain't much of a spread now, but it could be like it was. . . . Bill Rust's rustling us blind.

"Git Johnny Bates; he works fer the Association. . . . Love, an' *adios*. . . ."

Johnny looked at the girl again. She seemed so clean and fresh, sorta sparklin', like a new dipper. Twenty-one or two, mebbe, an' so damned pretty it was a crime.

A girl cow-boss, raised in Brookline, Massachusetts, and a little old lady, with New England stickin' out all over her like quills on a prickle hog, come out to Texas to pick up the reins of a hell-bent rancho on the Border!

Johnny jaw tightened. Thinkin' of Bill Rust, he was. Bill Rust and his cow-pirates.

CHAPTER TWO

Gun-Flame in the Dark

NIGHT drew its silken Texas robes around Gun River. The town came awake. The dogs and the flies were gone from Hidalgo Street. It was peopled now by men and women. Groups were gathered in the plaza. Voices rippled the gloom.

The plaintive melody of a guitar and a Spanish song lifted to mingle with the stars. Somehow, it seemed there was always music when guns were in the saddle.

There was a crowd in the Bienvenido Bar—swarthy vaqueros, sombre-faced gringos, and gay ladies, purveying charm.

Johnny Bates and Sunset Jones stood at the end of the bar.

Gun River was the outlet for stored-up human emotion, the spill-gate for cowboys of the brush, for owl-hooters and drovers. The liquor was potent; the girls easy to look at, and the games wide open.

Blood ran hot and reckless; tempers turned brittle. The flash of a knife; the blast of a gun—and another Border affair was written off in red. The law was tolerant, as most of those who died needed killing. Sooner or later the law of averages was bound to catch up with the *ladron* and the gun-tough. But thus far, neither the Rangers nor the Cattlemen's Association had been able to pop a noose over the head of Bill Rust.

Now and then a law-rider died in the brush, or withered down under the searing rush of muzzle flame from a window or an alley in town.

Men shrugged, raised their brows. Constituted authority made a routine gesture. The killer? *Quien sabe, amigo?* Soon the affair was forgotten.

Bill Rust was no ordinary brand burner. Working with a running iron was slow and crude, and left damning evidence written in cowhide.

Somewhere at a dirt tank in the brush, riders closed a water gap. By sun-up, the cattle gathered there had been pushed across the Rio Grande. Perhaps that night Bill Rust had been seen in Gun River, or he might have been the uninvited guest of the cowman whose cattle his gang had looted.

The things men had told him ran through the mind of Johnny Bates now. They said Bill Rust maintained a close-knit organization, with roots, perhaps, in the ground on which you stood.

Johnny's gaze sifted through the smoke-haze. Mebbe that lean vaquero next to him was a part of the outlaw fabric, or that painted lady who was smiling at Sunset.

Johnny saw Bill Rust and Sol Segrin in the mirror when they came through the door. He'd sorta figured they'd be looking him up.

THEY gave the room a brisk survey. After a little, Bill Rust came and stood beside Johnny Bates. He nodded at the bartender. The other slid a glass and bottle toward him.

A girl swung her lissom body up to the bar. Her fingers rested on Bill Rust's arm; her hard eyes softened. "Hullo, Bill."

He pushed her roughly. "Get away, wench!"

Johnny was watching in the mirror. Bill Rust seemed about thirty-five. He was the handsome, swashbuckling type that women went for. But his eye was bad—very bad indeed.

The girl pouted, and turned to Johnny. "Buy me a drink."

"Sure," Johnny said.

Sunset was watching in the mirror, too, and saw segundo move up beside the lean vaquero.

"Saw yuh talkin' to the Overstreet girl," Bill Rust said.

Johnny thought of the Triangle O place, somewhere out there in the black chaparral, just one fast jump from the muddy Rio Grande. Suddenly he wished that Ellen Overstreet had stayed in Boston. His lids narrowed. He nodded.

"Damn pretty girl," Bill Rust said. There was a glitter in his eyes, and Johnny knew exactly what the other was thinking. A devil like this would notice a clean, sweet girl.

"She's from Boston." The woman looked at Johnny from her hard eyes.

"How do you know?"

"What difference does it make?" The girl added at last, "I came from Beantown, too." Her hand shook a little. She spilled some of the liquor in her glass. "I've got folks back there—Dorchester." Johnny guessed that told the story.

"They tell me you work for the Asso-

ciation," Bill Rust observed, quietly surveying Johnny.

"Yeah," Johnny said. In the mirror he saw that the lank puncher and Sol Segrin were watching, listening.

Bill Rust tapped on the bar. "That's too bad."

"I dunno. I do all right."

"A man's life ought to be worth more than a few damned cows," Bill Rust said softly.

"Whose cows?" Johnny asked.

"Let's say Triangle O cows."

"This Ellen come to take over?" the girl said.

"That's right."

"I hear the last time the Association sent a man into the brush," Bill Rust was saying, "he never did come back."

Johnny nodded gravely.

"That would be Charley Johnson. Nice boy. Left a wife an' a couple of kids in San 'Tone."

Bill Rust's lids pinched to two slits. "Buzzard bait." A hard laugh cracked through his teeth.

"I've heard that one before," Johnny said.

"An' yuh still figger you're goin' to work the brush?"

"Right to the Rio Grande."

Bill Rust shrugged. "That suits me. Suits me just fine."

A few minutes later the other turned from the bar and slid into an empty chair at a poker table.

"Cowboy detective," the girl sneered. She turned her hard, painted face toward Johnny Bates. A slim forefinger was slowly pushing the spilled liquor into a pattern.

Johnny watched. The girl traced a moist ace; then an eight spot. She stabbed a quick glance at Johnny Bates from under long lashes; saw that his eye had caught it, and wiped it out with a quick movement of her palm.

The ace and eight spot. Dead man's cards!

THE girl looked past Johnny at the lean puncher. "Hullo, Turk Copin," as though seeing him for the first time.

Somehow it ran in Johnny's mind that the emphasis she gave the name and that short-lived design on the wet bar went together.

"Hi, Rose." Turk Copin considered her briefly.

A man who had been sitting beside Bill Rust at the poker table got up. Johnny watched him in the glass. He was heavy, compact; his jaw was black with stubble. He slid a glance in the direction of Turk Copin as he went toward the door.

The whole pattern took shape in Johnny's mind. Bill Rust wasn't losing anytime; he'd started the ball rolling.

Turk Copin went out, and Sol Segrin sat in beside Bill Rust. Johnny's voice was low against the run of talk in the room. *"Gracias*—Rose. Mebbe I can play angel for you sometime."

The girl's lips twisted into a cynical smile, as though, perhaps, she held no delusions concerning angels. *"Salud,* kid."

Johnny paid for the drinks, and went out with Sunset, pushing briskly through the batwing doors. He carried the picture of Rose, entertainer in the tawdry Bienvenido Bar, with him. . . .

Outside, the stars seemed very close to Hidalgo Street—the stars, and the Pearly Gates. Johnny had a feeling that a jigger wouldn't have to walk far on Hidalgo Street to reach them.

Somewhere a voice sang in Spanish of a Border love affair *"Mi amor! mi corazón!"*

Turk Copin was leaning against a post. A match flared. A bony countenance took life over the yellow fire-pot of two cupped hands. A pair of wicked little eyes slanted toward Johnny and Sunset.

Bill Rust would not forget. . . .

Johnny's glance traveled fast along the sidewalk. The stocky man was not in sight. Turk Copin flipped the match away.

Ellen Overstreet and Aunt Sophrony had mentioned some shopping—some Mexican stuff they wanted to send back to Boston. Tio Diego, the Triangle O puncher who had driven them in, had to see about supplies. It would be too late to start back to the ranch. They'd wait until morning.

That had suited Johnny—give him a chance to look around; size things up. He didn't exactly figure that Bill Rust would show his hand here in Gun River. Well, a hombre played the cards as they fell.

Johnny stepped close to Turk Copin, and set the muzzle of his Peacemaker Colt hard in the lean man's ribs.

"Start walkin', neighbor."

"What the hell's the matter with you?"

"Shut up!" cracked Sunset. "Or I'll bust yuh so hard you'll spatter."

Sunset wasn't exactly sure what was up. Johnny was an unpredictable cuss, but when you rode the river with a man, you backed the play, come hell or high water.

"You'll pay for this, yuh damned brand-hawk!" Turk Copin's voice was hoarse with rage.

"Mebbe," Johnny said, "but where I come from, yuh grab the bull by the horns, or climb a tree. I dunno, but it looks like a bushwhack."

"Smart, ain't cha?"

"Not so smart, just careful. Mosey."

They went toward the hotel, boot-heels popping on the walk.

The mouth of an alley loomed ahead like a bottomless pit.

"Adios, mi corazón," wailed the sad-voiced singer. His heart was breaking.

Turk Copin reached for his cigarette. Instead, he flipped off his sombrero and smashed it hard into Johnny's face; then leaped away.

Johnny cut in against the fence. Gun-flame scratched hard against the flat blackness of the alley, and a blasting detonation shook the air. The song stopped. A dead hush embraced Hidalgo Street.

It was shattered by a second report, and then a third. Yellow lances criss-crossed; dry dobe from a nearby wall showered the sidewalk. A flattened bullet screeched away.

Turk Copin wrenched his gun free, but Sunset was on his neck like a bulldogger, twisting him down. The six-shooter exploded harmlessly. The lean man hit the ground with a grunt. Sunset wrenched the weapon away and clubbed the other over the head.

The gunman in the alley was down.

Johnny said, "All right, cowboy?"

"Yup!" Sunset was breathing hard.

"Let's go."

CHAPTER THREE

Pilgrims—Heading for Hell!

HIDALGO STREET was like a disturbed ant-hill, except that these human ants were not silent. Figures were running across the plaza. Men were spilling from saloon and dance hall. A crowd was clogging the sidewalk in front of the alley.

Ellen Overstreet and her aunt were on the hotel gallery. The girl's face was pale in the dim light. She stared at Johnny Bates as he came up the steps.

"What happened?" Ellen cried.

"Little trouble," Johnny said. The light from the door streamed over him.

"There's blood on your hand."

"It's only a scratch. Look, I reckon we'd better start for the ranch tonight." Johnny's voice was low; his eye was watching the street alertly. 'Tommorow there may be an ambush."

"I—I'm afraid," the girl said.

"Fiddlesticks!" snapped Aunt Sophrony. She looked at Johnny Bates. "I'll start for anywhere. I despise this heathen place, and I know there are bedbugs."

"Go out the side door and across the alley to the stable yard," Johnny said. "We'll try and locate Tio Diego."

Sunset had gone on toward the feed yard. Johnny found him at the gate. Tio Diego—Uncle Jim—was there. He was withered and old and walked with a shuffling limp. He had been working for the Triangle O for a longe time.

"Get the team ready," Johnny said. "The women are goin' home. They'll be here in a minute. Make it fast."

"*Si, señor.*"

A tall cowboy had been talking to Tio Diego. He smelled of liquor. "What's up?" he demanded. He swayed a little on his feet.

Johnny eyed him sharply. "Nothing that concerns you, neighbor."

"My name is Stormy Adams—"

"You're drunk," Johnny said, brushing past.

"Drunk or sober, I'm Stormy Adams, the best damn cowboy in Texas."

Sunset was gearing up when Johnny reached the stable.

The hubbub was quieting. Somewhere music began, a gay Spanish fandango. There was the sound of castanets. Already the dead man was on the way to being forgotten. Tomorrow there would be only heat devils and sleeping dogs and flies on Hidalgo Street.

But Johnny Bates knew that Bill Rust would not forget.

The wagon rolled down the black gash of the narrow passage between the dobe wall and the low L of the hotel, past the barn and corrals, and on south into the night.

Johnny and Sunset mounted up and waited by the stable, watching to see how the tide would run. The tall cowboy was lacing on a saddle, swearing thickly.

When it was apparent that Bill Rust was making no threatening gesture, Johnny and Sunset rode on to overtake the wagon.

The wheels talked softly in the ruts of a trail that Amos Overstreet had carved in the brush. Few words were spoken. The girl asked Johnny concerning his wound. It wasn't bothering him, he told her.

"They might have killed you," she said.

"They might."

The brush ghostly and unreal in the moonlight, closed in. Now and then the road crossed a natural clearing, and again wormed through the great thickets.

A steer jerked to its feet and went crashing away. The girl uttered a half-stifled cry, and laughed nervously when they explained that it was only some brush-popper.

Once Johnny thought he heard the girl sobbing softly. He wondered if she would ever grow accustomed to this hard, primitive land. Kinda like tryin' to transplant a flower from a garden to the hostile cactus plains.

Once Johnny said, "Who was the cowboy in the stable yard, Tio, a friend of yours?"

"*Si.*" Tio was silent then. After a long silence, he said, "Once he was a *muy gran caballero, señor.* I know heem *muchos* years. Now he ees no good one, thees Stormy Adams."

Johnny and Sunset dropped back. Johnny was remembering the tall cowboy saddling up. In a country where rustlers

turned man-hunter, e hombre couldn't be too careful.

They waited in the shadow of a thicket. A lone horseman appeared at last. Johnny slipped his carbine from the rifle boot,

Johnny Bates, Brand-Hawk

and his clipped challenge stopped the newcomer.

"Where yuh headin', stranger?"

"Hell, I reckon."

"You're just half a trigger-pull from there right now."

"I been closer."

Johnny and Sunset moved up. It was the tall cowboy, Stormy Adams. He sat slumped in the saddle, hands on the pommel, watching them under his hat-brim. He seemed to have sobered up.

Tio Diego had said Stormy Adams was a bad egg. How bad, Johnny wondered. One of Bill Rust's renegades, mebbe.

Sunset sidled his horse in and looked the stranger over. The man wore no gun-belt; carried no rifle. There was no harness or shoulder gun.

"Where's yore hardware, mister?"

"Pawned it in Gun River, and got drunk."

"Yuh know the Triangle O place?" Johnny said.

"Yes."

"We're headin' there."

They rode on to the tune of creaking saddle-leather. Half an hour later they overtook the wagon.

The girl looked back. "Where have you been?"

"Oh, we just made a little sashay." Johnny saw her staring at Stormy Adams.

The miles crawled under hoof and wagon wheel. They were like a parade of shadows, tip-toeing down phantom trails. Once there was the brief hysterical laughter of coyotes. Shooting stars stabbed across the sky at intervals.

"What do they make yuh think of?" Stormy Adams said.

"Guns in the dark," Johnny Bates told him.

THE sky turned gray in the east; then pink. Dawn rinsed muddy shadows from the thickets, and stripped the softening cloak of night from Stormy Adams.

He was dirty and unshaved; his clothes were soiled and patched. His bloodshot eyes held sullen glints. The bronc was a ribby scrub. The gear was old and battered; the saddle-blanket was in shreds.

Johnny saw Ellen Overstreet watching him, but Stormy never looked at her.

A gate and low, rambling ranch buildings stood at the end of the road. As the wagon stopped in the yard, a huge Negro came from the corrals.

"Mawnin', boss an' folks."

"This is Mose," the girl told Johnny.

"It seems that he is part of my inheritance, along with Tio Diego and Stumpy."

"Yaas, marm," old Mose said. "'Spec' ah got Triangle O burnt in mah hide."

Stumpy came to the kitchen door. A battered sombrero was cocked on the back of his head. He was runty, Johnny observed, and bow-legged and as homely as a sod shanty.

"Come an' git it!" he yelled. "I was jist goin' to throw it out."

Old Mose nodded at Stormy, "Hi, cowboy."

"Hi, Mose."

There was the smell of coffee in the air, blending with wood-smoke. Steak was sizzling in the skillet.

The horses were unsaddled and turned into one of the corrals. Aunt Sophrony had taken off her ridiculous bonnet and was setting out extra places.

The girl filled a pan with hot water and found some bandages. She helped Sunset dress the wound. The bullet had plowed an ugly furrow between the elbow and shoulder of his right arm.

Ellen's face was deathly pale and Johnny noticed her hands were trembling. He guessed it had been a tough job for her, but she was game.

"Man, who-all was gunnin' fer you?" demanded old Mose.

"Bill Rust."

"Lordy, you mus' have a guardian angel," Mose said, shaking his head. "When that debbil guns fer 'em, they done stay down."

"A painted angel," Johnny said. "If it hadn't been for her, me an' Sunset would been campin' with Charley Johnson."

"Tell me about her," Ellen said.

"One of the girls in the Bienvenida Bar wrote a message for me in some spilled whiskey," Johnny said. "It looks like I read it correct."

Stormy Adams was washing up at a bench. He slicked his long hair with a comb, hung by a string beside a mirror fragment; then hunkered down, hunting papers and tobacco.

He was about twenty-five, Johnny thought. Dissipation had marred his good looks. He seemed bitter, hard. The girl's glance went toward him.

"Who is he?" she asked.

"Stormy Adams," old Mose said. "His place is ten mile yonder, over dere at de foot o' dem Picachos. De Walkin' A. kinda gone to rack an' ruin, jes, like Stormy hisse'f."

AUNT SOPHRONY said grace at breakfast. Johnny's fork was half way to his mouth. He eased it back to his plate and slid a sheepish grin at the girl. She smiled at him.

". . . and these, Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty," in that slow, precise Boston accent.

Johnny's lips thinned a little. It was something for a man to think on. A broken-down cow-ranch in the Texas brush, ridden over by Bill Rust and his outlaws. Kinda like the Pilgrims, Johnny Bates thought, heads bowed in prayer on that first Thanksgiving, facing a wilderness peopled by savages.

All through the meal, Johnny was aware of the fact that Stormy Adams was giving him furtive little side glances. He decided that the other would bear watching.

After breakfast, Stumpy, old Mose and Stormy Adams hunkered down by the bunkhouse for a smoke. Everything at the Triangle O seemed at a standstill. There was no boss giving orders, no work planned for the day, no riders gearing up.

From his talk with the girl and her aunt in town, Johnny had gathered that the older woman's fortune had dwindled away these past years until there was almost nothing left. Their future financial security was tied up in the cow-ranch that Amos Overstreet had left.

Johnny and Tio Diego sat on a bench

outside the kitchen door. When the dishes were done, the girl joined them.

"How many cattle are there, Tio?" Johnny said.

"No one knows, señor, but many. Many *orejanas* an' strays. An' *ladinos*—the wild ones, thees fellows. See, my crooked leg? Eet ees got from chasin' heem."

Johnny knew. "Limb skinners," they called the cowboys of the brush. Horses were killed running cattle in those spined thickets and men were crippled up.

"We ride on roundup," Tio said, "an' when we have cattle gathered—*diablo!* thees Beel Rust steel them away. He keel our vaqueros, an' *mañana* he ees gone."

Tio Diego said the Overstreet ranch had been a great hacienda once. He told of the life in the old days, of great roundups and gay caballeros, and dances lasting until dawn.

Triangle O steers had gone up the feeder trails to join the drivers pointing north across Texas and the Indian Nations to Kansas.

The longhorns were gone now, and in their places were Brahmas and crossbreeds—duns and smokies and paints, gaunt, gourd-necked and narrow of hip.

Tio told, too, of Cal Adams and the Walking A, and of the misfortune that had dogged the brand. Mrs. Adams had died giving birth to her son. When Stormy was eighteen, his father had been killed in a fight across the Rio Grande, attempting to turn back rustled cattle.

Tio spoke of a *maestra*—a young schoolteacher—who had arrived from Boston. She had come to live at the Triangle O. She had known Amos Overstreet's son, it seemed.

"Grandfather sent dad to college in Boston," Ellen told Johnny. "Father married and settled down in Boston. He and mother were killed in a train wreck a few years ago."

"Thees señorita was varee preety, señor," old Tio went on. "She seeng an' play the *guitarra*. Stormy Adams, he ees come often. He teach her to ride an' rope, an everybody ees mos' happy." Tio's eyes brightened at the memory; then he shrugged dismally.

There had been a quarrel. "They are part in great anger, señor. One night at a *baile* the girl had met a *muy hermosa* hombre. A *fanfarron*—a reckless, swaggering fellow. Bill Rust."

A month later, she had married him; some said in spite. But Bill Rust had soon tired of her. The girl had disappeared. Later she was seen in Gun River. She had never returned to the ranch.

Bill Rust, in the meantime, had gathered up a desperate gang and was raiding the Border ranches. And Stormy Adams. . . . Well, he had pretty much gone to the devil.

"Why, it's like a story from a book!" Ellen Overstreet exclaimed. Suddenly she looked at Tio Diego, frowning thoughtfully. "What was the girl's name?" she said.

"Rosa, Mees," Tio said. "Rosa Reeter."

Ellen's eyes widened. "Rose Ritter! Why, I went to school with her. How stupid of me not to know, at once. I remember now that my grandmother spoke of her in one of her letters—said she was staying at the ranch, and teaching school."

Johnny Bates rolled a cigarette. He stared away toward the blue peaks of the Picachos. He was seeing again a hard, painted face—Rose of the Bienvenida Bar.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Gun-Law, Neighbor!"

DUST flew its pennant on the road to the south. Johnny Bates watched it, then glanced at the girl. "Reckon we're

goin' to have quick company," he said.

Sunset had been looking over the horses in the corral. He came toward the house but stopped, as his eye caught the yellow plume. Then he went into the gear room and appeared a moment later with a .30-30.

The morning sun glinted on silver saddle ornaments as the riders swung through the ranch gate. The horse in the lead was a *bayo coyote,* Bill Rust's buckskin. Sol Segrin was flanking up. The others made a tight group behind, grim-eyed and intent.

Ellen Overstreet got up from the bench slowly, and stood watching, her head thrown back, her lips tight.

Bill Rust was smiling thinly. *"Buenas dias, señorita!"* He swept off his sombrero. "I have stopped to pay my respects."

Ellen said, "How do you do?" Her voice was steady.

Sol Segrin was watching Johnny Bates. His hand was close to his gun. His lids were screwed down over hot coals.

Sunset had leaned the Winchester against the house and was shaping up a cigarette. Down at the bunkhouse, Stumpy and old Mose had pulled erect. Stormy Adams was watching under his hat brim.

Johnny's eye touched each hard-bitten rider swiftly. One was square-built, like the segundo. One wore a knife scar across his face. It had left his mouth a little askew. One was swarthy, snake-eyed. The last had high cheekbones and deep pock marks. Turk Copin was not there, Johnny noticed.

Johnny heard a step behind him in the kitchen, heard Aunt Sophrony say, "Land o' Goshen!"

Bill Rust said, "You fogged down one of my men in Gun River."

"Oh," Johnny said, "was that bushwhack hombre workin' for you?"

"I don't know who tipped you off," Bill Rust said, "but I'll find out. And next time we'll do the notch-cuttin'."

That was throwin' fight talk right into the teeth of the Association. Johnny remembered the last words of his chief: "The Rangers and River guards haven't been able to get the goods on Bill Rust; Charley Johnson never reported back. You've got to pack gun-gospel into that outlaw heaven."

Johnny flicked away his cigarette. "Let's put it this way," he said. Johnny's six-shooter hung at his hip, grip to the front.

The cigarette stub had not hit the ground when Johnny made his "border draw"—a cross-draw. The .45 snapped clear and leveled on Bill Rust.

The outlaw made a half move for his gun, and stopped. His eyes might have been dipped in hell's brimming bath. He gritted an oath.

The carbine leaning against the house had been hidden behind the girl. Sunset flipped it up, cocked it and swung the muzzle on Sol Segrin. His face was like a rock ledge.

Stumpy and old Mose were running toward the gear room. A moment later they broke from the door with Winchesters. Tio Diego moved over to give Ellen Overstreet the protection of his thin old body.

These things, Johnny saw from the tail of his eye and he knew a grim satisfaction. A fighting crew was siding him.

Stormy Adams still squatted on his heels, plainly indicating that he wanted no part in the affair. Johnny remembered that, too.

"We'll scratch that thing in town last night," Johnny said, biting off his words. "This ain't no feud. I'm roddin' the law for the Association This cattle stealin' has got to stop I'm servin' notice, Rust. If I ever get evidence that you're doing it, I'll throw the law at yuh"

"The law!" snarled Bill Rust

"Gun-law, neighbor." Johnny's eyes were smoky. "Get goin'."

Sol Segrin rolled out his thick under lip and leered at Ellen Overstreet. "We'll call ag'in," he rasped. "There ain't many nice girls like you in the brush."

Bill Rust said, "Come on." The horsemen turned and swung toward the gate. Dust settled behind them.

STORMY ADAMS walked toward the house, his face set and haggard. "This ain't any place for women-folks," he flung out. "You can't tell what Rust will do."

Aunt Sophrony sniffed. "Young man, here I am, and here I stay!"

Johnny said, "Who's foreman?"

Old Mose pointed at Stumpy.

"I want you to start roundin' up all of the cattle you can get hold of," said Johnny.

"Sure," sneered Stormy, "so Bill Rust can steal 'em."

"You want to rep for the Walkin' A?" Johnny asked him.

"Not me. I don't want any part of it."

"Look," Johnny cracked, "you're the first yellow-bellied, white-livered cowman I ever knew."

"You can't talk to me like that!" Stormy cried, his hands suddenly clenched.

"I'm givin' yuh a chance to quit bein' a bum an' turn fightin' man," said Johnny.

"To hell with it! What have I got to fight for?"

"I can give yuh somethin' right soon," Johnny said. And he ripped a left hook into Stormy's mouth.

It set the other back on his heels. His eyes flamed with sudden rage. He came in swinging. Sunset pushed him away roughly. "Hey, this ranny has only got one good hand."

"That's all I need to whip a quitter," Johnny said disgustedly.

Stormy wiped the blood from his mouth. "You an' me will settle this later," he said hoarsely.

"You shouldn't have done that," the girl told Johnny. "Stormy is our guest—and our neighbor."

Ellen Overstreet looked straight at Stormy Adams. Their eyes held. The girl smiled at him. "I think I understand," she said.

Stormy seemed perplexed, a little ashamed "Thank yuh, miss," he said at last. "I—I won't forget it." He heeled around and went toward the corral. A few minutes later he rode away.

"MOONSHININ'," they called it. Instead of a chuck wagon, the Triangle O used a pack horse. Each rider carried his own bedroll. The pack animal carried the grub and cooking utensils, which included a jug, a skillet and coffeepot.

"Yuh ain't goin' to be no good poppin' them wild ones out of the brush," Stumpy told Johnny, "until yore arm gits well."

"*Si*," Tio said. "An' somebody has to stay weet the señora an' señorita."

"I've invalided myself into a pleasant job," Johnny said.

There were twelve horses in the cavvy—three extra for each rider. Stumpy said they would work to hold the cattle at Tortuga Tank, six miles south, for a start.

Johnny showed Ellen how to cinch up a saddle, how to shake out a noose, how to neck rein and ride. In a week, she was able to stay on top when a cold bronc humped its back.

They explored the ranch and made sashays into the brush. The chaparral was stiletto-armed. Even the golden-flowered retama had sheathed claws. Johnny pointed out the devil's head, the Spanish dagger, the huisache, spinous and sinister and the cat-claw.

They worked up small bunches of the gentler cattle and hazed them into the big fenced pasture near the ranch. They saw

mavericks, and now and then a *ladino* spooked away like a horned jackrabbit.

"They're all yours," Johnny said, "if yuh can throw a brand on 'em."

Once the girl tried to turn a sooky cow. Her horse, running at breakneck speed, stumbled and went down.

Johnny helped her up, and she clung to him for a moment, dazed, shaken. Johnny thought he was going to kiss her, as she swayed against him, but he didn't, and regretted it ever afterward.

Aunt Sophrony, apparently resigned to spending the rest of her days in Texas, said she was going to send for her four-posted bed and goose-feather tick. She seemed not greatly concerned about the outlaws.

"*Humph*" she sniffed. "The Lord's on our side!"

"Yuh reckon Bill Rust knows that, Aunty?" Johnny asked.

"He'll find out—if you're as good a fighter as the rest of us, young man!"

ONE morning, Johnny and the girl rode to Tortuga Tank, following the trail of the Triangle O punchers. There were about two hundred cattle in the fenced enclosure at the water hole, including a few outlaw steers, or cactus boomers, as Johnny called them.

When the cowboys came in at noon, Stormy Adams was with them, a different Stormy, somehow. His eyes were clear and bright. He had a new snap and hardness. A little more ramrod in his spine, Johnny decided.

Ellen's gaze ran up and down him in frank approval. She held out her hand. "Hullo, neighbor."

"What are you doin' here?" Johnny demanded.

"Reppin' for the Walkin' A." Stormy scowled at Johnny Bates. "I changed my mind."

"I'm *so* glad!" the girl cried.

"Yore grandfather an' my dad were close friends," Stormy told her. "Looks like it's up to us to keep up the tradition of the iron."

"We're goin' to shove this bunch to the home ranch," Stumpy said. "Start 'em tomorrow or next day, or Bill Rust is liable to bust 'em for the Border."

"I'm starved," the girl said.

Johnny wondered how she would take to range fare. There was cornbread and meat. Tio had saved the tallow from a butchered animal, putting it in the jug.

The cornbread batter was made from a mixture of meal, tallow and water, and fried in the skillet. The dried meat was cooked on the coals and seasoned with *chiltipiquines*—little red peppers.

Ellen said it was the best meal she had ever eaten. When she and Johnny were preparing to return to the ranch, she asked, "Which way is your place, Stormy?"

Johnny saw the other's face cloud. He hesitated; then said vaguely, "Over west."

Johnny remembered that old Mose had said the Walking A was at the foot of the Picachos, and they swung that way. The jagged peaks rose at last as a bulwark before them. On a ridge they reined in to look down on dilapidated ranch buildings, crude fences and the water of a dirt tank, silver in the sun.

"Guess that must be the Walkin' A," Johnny said.

"There's smoke coming from the chimney," Ellen said. "I thought Stormy lived alone."

Johnny took a pair of field glasses from a case. There were horses in a corral. One was a *bayo coyote*—a buckskin with a black line along its spine. His eyes turned hard and bright. It was Bill Rust's horse.

Sol Segrin and Turk Copin came from the cook house.

"There's somebody there," the girl said.

(*Continued on page 137*)

DEAD COWMEN GUARD THE FIRE-LINE

By Bart Cassidy

A mule-headed war-necked rancher, Rufe Martindale would rather turn Shoshone Valley into a burning holocaust than help Forest Ranger Hilton quell those dread, destroying flames. For Martindale believed that such a fire could best be fought with cowmen's bullets—and rangers' blood!

Novel of a purgatory cattle-range

Cort . . .
dragged the wounded
range-boss with him . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Who'd Help a Ranger?

FOR the tenth time, Forest Ranger Cort Hilton mopped sweat from his grimed face, mounted his big horse and loped along his pitifully thin line of fire-fighters, exhorting, pleading, bullying. To the east sixty acres of brush and scattered timber roared with flame. Smoke boiled upward like vast plumes of dust, as though some irate monster rampaged there, lashing itself into fury before escaping into the virgin timber to the west.

Cort reined in, swung down before a burly man who hunkered in the fire trail. He jerked him erect and shoved him roughly.

"Snap into it, you!" he ordered. "We've got to get a line around this blaze while there's no wind. Tie into that shovelin'!"

The man growled, shaking off his arm. "Don't shove me around, Ranger-man. I'm doin' all I can. A man's gotta breathe something beside smoke and I'm damned if I can drive team all night and fight fire all day. To hell with you!"

He turned slowly to his task, coughing, gagging in the gusting smoke, swiping his sweat-beaded face with his sleeve. His

face a mask, Cort turned to weigh their chances. He knew his crew felt just as he did—physically spent from their three hour furious assault upon the borders of the blaze that might in a few hours' time, easily gut the finest stand of timber in the Warbonnet Mountains. Twelve men on a job that called for fifty, at least. And yet it was only by the sheerest luck he had reached the unexplained blaze just as a twelve wagon train of the Shoshone Transportation Company had rolled along yonder road.

Cort smiled grimly, recalling how the teamsters had bucked at being impressed for fire duty, the vain arguments they had voiced, their profane threats. Those teamsters were loyal to Old Rufe Martindale, kingpin of Basalt City and the whole Shoshone Valley, who had led the attack against the rulings of the Forest Service, directly after the formation of the Shoshone Mountain Reserve. Closing the high ranges to free grazing had struck hardest at Martindale's far flung Bowleg M. He had never relaxed his antagonism.

Cort Hilton was rising again to the saddle, when Pete Daggett, Martindale's wagon-boss came raging up. "You, Deke," he bellowed at the man Cort had just stirred to action. "Take your shovel down to the road. Fire's eatin' down to'rds the wagons. Next thing we know they'll be goin' up in smoke. Hilton, I'm pullin' my men off your business an' puttin' 'em on their own."

"You do," Cort warned him, "and you'll all go to jail. You're dealing with Uncle Sam now. Get back to your place."

A slight gust of wind set the fire roaring, lifted the smoke pall for one brief moment. And Cort saw the wagon men hurrying back toward the road, leaving their places on the line, where Pete Daggett had passed.

Cursing, he swung into the saddle to round them up again, when the wind came—straight out of the maw of gathering weather in the east. Heat beat a steady pressure against the fire line, and choking smoke swirled along the hillsides. Cort hesitated. Panic edged Pete Daggett's bull bellow.

"There she comes, boys—the wind. Back to the wagons, you buckskin-poppers! Run for it!"

Cort put his pony alongside the running men. "Call them back to their places, Daggett, or you'll all suffer."

Daggett swung at him with the shovel, caught the horse in the side. It leaped the fire break, got a flying brand on the rump and went to bucking. Caught off balance by that first sidewise leap, Cort struggled to stay. He lost a stirrup, grabbed at the horn, missed and went over the animal's head. He lit in a sumac thicket, spraddled out. And though he extricated himself quickly, his horse was gone; the freighters were gone, and through the roar of the conflagration he could hear the dull rumble of the heavy wagons. He was alone in a sea of lung-searing smoke.

The next hour was a crazy nightmare. Dropping occasionally for a breath of cleaner air, he staggered along the line of the break, beating out incipient blazes on the unburned side, starting futile backfires and rushing on to new spots of danger. The heat became terrific as the wind freshened. His clothes caught fire and he beat the sparks out. The blistering air seared his lungs, but there was no relief save in flight. Thirst tortured him and increasing exhaustion slowed him when there was need for speed. He was beaten, weary, and almost hopeless, when a brilliant flash struck through the deepening pall. Thunder crashed, rolling along the sky. Rain!

The roar of flames gave way to muttering, hissing, snapping. Then there was only steam where there had once been smoke; sweetness to the air that had been thick, unbreathable with smoke;

delicious, drenching coolness where there had been singeing heat before. And Ranger Cort Hilton, sobbing with relief, raised his blistered face aloft, lest he miss one of those precious drops.

THE day was about spent when Cort came stumbling wearily into Basalt City, his clothes little better than burned rags, the soles dropping off his boots, hungry and in need of rest. He had come to ignore the jibes of the townsmen who were body and soul with Rufe Martindale in his fight against the Service. Nor did he notice them now as they stared at him—until he heard his name spoken.

"Hey, Hilton! Step over here; I'd like a word with you."

Cort halted, his burned eyes peering across the street at the figure of Rufe Martindale framed in the portal of the Shoshone Transportation Company office. Cort was in no condition to armor himself against the barbed thrusts of this Soshone Valley dictator. But, equally, he was in no position to dodge the issue that had cost him one defeat already today. He crossed the street, planted himself before the dour, badger-gray man who had come here a green cowpuncher and who now controlled its range, its people and its destiny.

"Make it short, Martindale," he said friendlessly. "I'm tired and I've got business that won't wait."

Martindale scowled, rolling the black cigar between his full lips. "First thing you'll have to learn around here, Hilton, is that your business don't come first with us. Daggett has reported how you held up my wagons and put those worn-out teamsters on the fire line. You went too far, Ranger. For that bit of interference, I'm filing a damage suit against you, and another for each of the twelve boys you abused. You went too far that time!"

"Is that all you called me over for, Martindale?"

"All?" The man hurled his cigar into the street. "Damn your skin, you talk like it's nothing. I'll show you what happens when a gent comes in here, spits in my face an' tells me I dassant wipe it off. I'll—"

"Where's Pete Daggett now?" Cort broke in icily.

"In the Cowskin Salon. Why?"

And when Cort only turned on his heel and stalked toward the Cowskin: "Hey, where you goin'? What you up to now?"

"I'm spitting in your face again, Martindale. And this time I don't think you can wipe it off. He's going to jail for the federal offense of interfering with a ranger in line of duty. And maybe the rest of your freighters. . . . I haven't decided yet."

"Like hell!" Martindale came darting after him, matching his stride, threatening, blustering. At the saloon door, he caught Cort's shoulder, spun him around. "Look here, Hilton, it's time you an' me had a plain settlement. If you can't coöperate with me in this basin, you'll go. If I have to go to Washington an' take you up with the congressman."

Cort caught him by the slack of his shirt, drew him close. "Listen, mister," he said too softly. "You make this a personal matter, because you don't like me. But you're up against the government, which you better understand. Who are you to talk about coöperation? I've been here six months, and the only way you've coöperated is to hand me grief. Pete Daggett is going to jail, and you can try to do what you will about it. Now get out of my way."

He pushed Martindale from him. The old cowman took three quick backward steps, his face purpling with rage. His right hand slapped against his thigh, a reflection of the day when each man wore a weapon to enforce his own personal law. Then, realizing he was making himself ridiculous, he straightened.

"You fool!" he muttered. "You crazy young fool."

Then he had turned away and was marching stiffly along the walk as Cort turned into the saloon.

THERE were very few patrons at this hour, but Daggett and three teamsters who stood near the end of the bar, talking over their drinks. They fell silent at sight of the battered, smoke-grimed ranger, waited stiffly as he approached. The doors were flapping as curious townsmen came in behind Cort, but he paid them no heed. The ranger brushed past two glowering freighters, planted himself before Daggett.

"Finish your drink," he said without rancor. "You're going with me, Daggett. We've got unfinished business. "You're under arrest."

"For what?"

"For quitting fire line duty, where I impressed you."

Daggett laughed. "What you talkin' about. You got no authority to jail me. Now if you get the sheriff. . . ."

Cort had expected reference to county law, placed there by Martindale and dominated by him and his organization. He whipped the gun from his underarm holster and buried the muzzle in Daggett's middle.

"Move. . . . Don't argue!" he warned. "Don't make me kill you, Daggett!"

The man glanced at his companions. Reading no offer of help in their eyes, he shrugged and moved to the door, Cort prodding him. The crowd parted to let them through, followed them outside and along the walk to the jail.

The sheriff, a squirrel-faced man with nervous eyes, was ready for him. Rufe Martindale was there, and with him was Carson Kessler, superintendent of his far-reaching business enterprises, lawyer, and cold-blooded business man.

The sheriff and Martindale fell back, leaving Kessler facing Cort and his prisoner. He was a tall, slender man, cold-eyed and master of a cynical, disarming smile.

"What is this?" he asked unemotionally. "Mister Martindale says—"

"I don't care what he says," broke in Cort, and shoved past him. "Sheriff, I want this man booked and put behind bars. Charged with deserting his post on the fire-line, and hindering a Federal officer in the performance of his duty."

Kessler led the laugh. "I'm advising the sheriff to refuse this arrest. I know what you're going to say. You'll file an information with the Government commissioner at Cheyenne. He may give it to the federal grand jury. Time enough then for us to fight back, and we'll show you were subjecting these men to dangers far beyond the line of duty when they quit the fire-line. You may win, but you'll know you've been in a fight. For what? Just to prove your authority over these tired boys who were merely trying to get their job done. Is it worth it, Hilton? Is it worth having to fight Martindale's damage suit?"

For all his bitterness Cort knew it wasn't worth it. In Martindale there was vast antagonism to the Forest Service, to him, and to anything that stood in his way Martindale was foe commanding respect, but in no wise as dangerous as Kessler.

This suavely smiling man was smart. He made it his business to know the law. And Cort knew that stubbornness on his part, with defeat in the courts, would hurt the Service worse than to retire now, as gracefully as possible.

"Do I understand," he asked, "that there will be no damage suit, if I withdraw this charge?"

Kessler inclined his head. "We will be glad to so stipulate," he said formally. "What do you say?"

Cort put away his gun, nodding glum-

ly. "This time," he said with emphasis, "I'll agree to overlook the matter, mainly because I had the good fortune to put out this blaze, thanks to a downpour. If the fire had spread, eating into the stands of timber, I'd have fought you all the way. You people are going to learn that the Forest Service is here to stay, and that it means business. Good-evening!"

He turned out through the door, their laughter following him.

CHAPTER TWO

Death in the Burn

NEXT morning, after breakfast and a good night's sleep in the hotel, Cort Hilton felt better. His two defeats had hurt him personally, but they had served to impress upon Shoshone Basin folks that the Service was on the job, a force to be reckoned with.

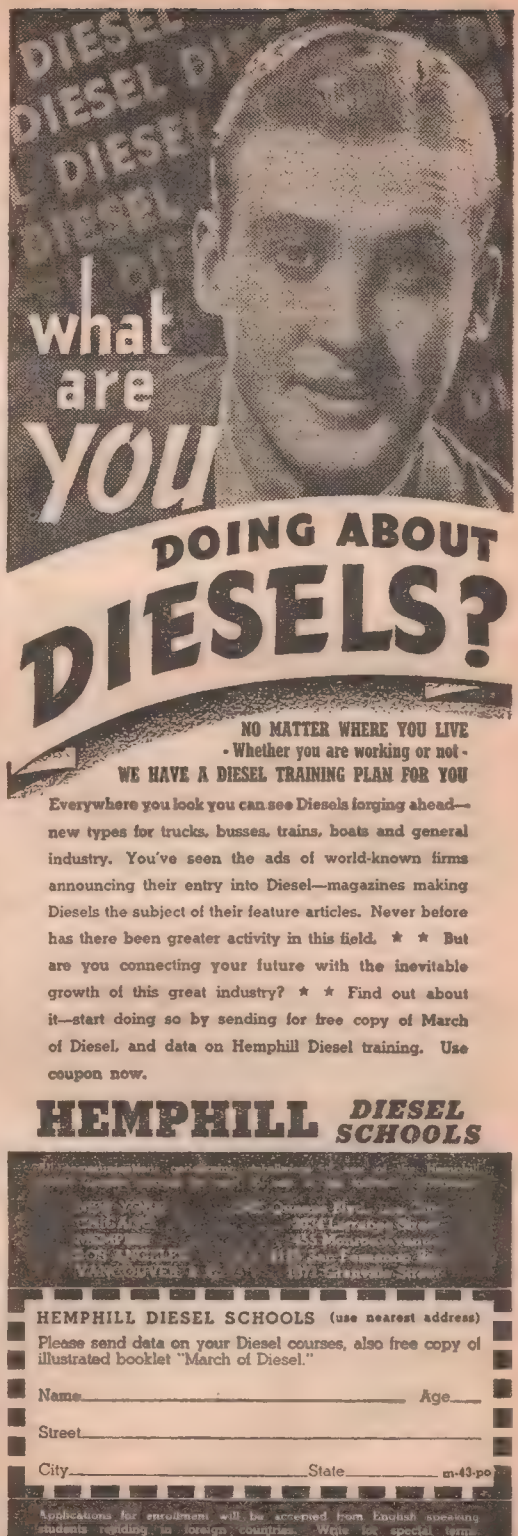
Having fitted himself with new denims at the general store, Cort got his horse at the stable and set out for his headquarters cabin in Hanging Meadow near Lookout Peak. He was barely a mile out of town when he saw the horseman ahead, his mount standing square across the road. It was Joe Gaspard, halfbreed Shoshone, one-time corral boss for Rufe Martindale and later Cort's handy man—horse wrangler, lookout, patrol-rider and fire-guard. The breed's black, unwinking eyes were fixed intently on Cort.

"Joe see smoke, find fire. You gone, but your horse come home."

Cort nodded. "Yeah. I had to walk to town. It was a close thing, Joe. If the rain hadn't come. . . ."

"Ugh!" The breed grunted. "Fire bad Kill game and make water run off too fast after storm. Only bad man set fire."

Startled, Cort swung to look at him. "What do you mean, Joe? You think. . . ?"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"Come," said Joe, and let the silence stand between them.

Leading the way, he pushed straight toward the scene of the fire and onto the burn. Cort, weighing the damage with a view of stating it in his report to his supervisor, was almost on top of that scorched, shapeless thing on the ground before he saw it. Joe Caspard had reined in with a grunt, was pointing.

"You see, boss? Dead man!"

Cort dismounted to kneel beside that gruesome object. It lay in the midst of what had once been a thicket of buckbrush, near where the blaze had gained its start. All clothing had been burned from the body. The limbs were gnarled and partly burned off. All flesh had been cooked from the head, leaving only a charred skull. And through that skull was a hole that could only have been made by a bullet. This man, whoever he was, had been slain by a shot from behind. Beside him lay a .45 Colt, with the grips burned off.

Half sickened and bewildered, Cort knelt there trying to reconstruct what had happened here before he showed on the scene. Joe Gaspard's grunt roused him. The breed had dismounted, had swung a half circle on foot. And now he was stooping, lifting something from the ash.

"Dead man lose watch," he muttered.

Cort moved over to examine the ruined timepiece, opened his knife and pried off the case. A name leaped up at him. "To Rufe Martindale, from Myra."

Shocked, Cort looked at Joe Gaspard. "What you make of this, Joe?"

Blank-faced, Gaspard said: "Two men. One shoot other here; many shots. Take out empties. . . . Look!" He gathered up a half dozen scorched and empty brass shells. "Killer then load gun from pocket mebby—lose watch. After that, start fire to burn dead man." He pointed to the

charred ends of nested twigs at the edge of the burn. "Heap bad."

Cort looked at the body. "Any idea who that is, Joe?"

The breed shook his head. "No can tell now."

Cort considered. This thing was a lot more important than he had at first believed. The evidence pointed to Martindale having murdered a man in cold blood and starting the fire to cover his crime. It was plainly a case for the sheriff and coroner, both Martindale men. Fetching news of this killing, with evidence pointing to the most powerful man on Shoshone range, would set the community still further against him.

Cort pocketed the watch and spent cartridges. "Ride back to the cabin, Joe," he ordered, "and wait till I come. It'll be a day, maybe two. And say nothing about this to anyone, you understand?

"Me say nothing," grunted the breed, mounting and heading across the burn to the timber.

The ranger swung up, loped down to the road, reaching it just as a Bowleg M cowpuncher came galloping up. The man reared his pony to a halt, grinned tauntingly at Cort and let his eyes swing to Joe Gaspard, even then vanishing in the pines.

"H'are yuh, Ranger," he greeted. "You an' the halfbreed cookin' up a deal to blame somebody for settin' this bonfire, eh? Yo're crazy. Ever hear of lightnin'? We had fires in these hills before the Forest Service was even heard of. An' the Injuns had 'em before ever the white men came. Think it over."

He struck his pony with the spurs, raced away toward Basalt City. Leaving Cort staring after him, pulling his chin reflectively. It was plain the cowboy had taken time out to plant a natural reason for the fire. Why? Did he know about the body lying up yonder? Was this killing something the range recognized as inevitable? It was an idea; something to prompt a search for details of a personal feud.

CORT could hardly have told why he choose to swing out the road, following the toe of the hills away from the town. The broad valley range of the Bowleg M was on his right, yet there were no cattle to be seen. The answer came when he had ridden perhaps five miles. Here, opposite the entrance of Coldwater Canyon, sign lay plain across the road.

No earlier than yesterday, large numbers of cattle had been driven off the parched flats and into the reserve. Maybe right while Cort was battling the fire. That offered another reason for starting the conflagration. But who would have had the interest or the temerity to cross Martindale in his determination to use the forest grazing grounds without payment of the fifty cent poll fee?

Filing the facts against future consideration, Cort lit out now for Basalt City. It was mid-afternoon when he dismounted and barged into the office of the Shoshone Transportation Company. Ignoring the stares of two startled clerks, he strode to the rear, shouldered open a door marked; "Mr. Martindale—Private." Carson Kessler spun from his desk to regard the ranger.

"Well?"

"Where's Rufe Martindale?" demanded Cort.

The suave, sallow man rose, chuckling. "Who knows, Ranger? Maybe he's hiding out, scared to death of you. Care to search the office."

Cort glared at him, tortured by the sudden desire to twist the fellow's neck. Then he whirled outside and pounded the walk toward the jailhouse. He had no confidence at all in Sheriff Hoke Fenton, yet the least he could do was to report the murder. He was steeled to barbed antagonism, when he charged grimly to

the door of the sheriff's office. Yet, at the threshold, he was totally unprepared for what he saw.

Fenton sat at his desk, embarrassed and uncomfortable. In the middle of the room Rufe Martindale stood defensively, recoiling a little from the vehemence of a slender young girl. Her flow of swift words ended in a sob as she whirled to his step. And Cort was caught and held by the picture she made.

Trouble marred the natural beauty of her face. Moist lashes lent her an irresistible piquancy. Altogether she struck the ranger as being vitally strong, fresh and clean as the mountains he loved and infinitely more wholesome than any woman he had ever seen. Rufe Martindale scowled over her shoulder.

"Hilton!" he barked intolerantly. "You here again! Far as I'm concerned, the Mark Daggett business is closed. If you keep harpin' on it, I'll take to you personal an' make a good ranger out of you. Get out and let us be."

Woodenly Cort said: "Forget Daggett. I'm here on a heap more important business. Where were you yesterday morning when the fire started?"

Martindale's eyes narrowed and dull red burned on his weathered cheeks. "I was ridin' across the range, headin' for town from the ranch."

"Sure you weren't hazing cattle into the forest—cattle I've refused to let you pasture there?"

"No!" Martindale bellowed. "Say, what is this? Who do you think. . . .?"

"You were alone, Martindale?"

"Yes, I was alone; what of it? What you driving at?"

Cort withdrew the charred watch. "Ever see this, Mister Martindale?"

The man stared at it, snatched. Cort withheld it. Martindale closed with him, struggling. "Give me that, Hilton. That watch is mine. Where. . . .?"

"That's what I wanted you to admit," said Cort, grimly. "Sheriff," he turned to the gaping lawman, "I charge Rufe Martindale with murder, and with willfully starting a fire in a national forest to hide the first crime. This watch and a handful of empty shells came from the spot where evidence shows somebody started that blaze. A few rods away lies the roasted body of a man, killed by a bullet through the brain. I have a witness to all these facts and I will produce him at the proper time."

FOR a moment there was stunned silence. Then the girl lifted a hand as if to ward off a blow, and she voiced a pitiful little cry. Martindale had turned gray and he seemed frozen. Only the sheriff was possessed of his full faculties.

"Who's the dead man, Hilton?"

"Too badly burned to be recognizable," said Cort. "But it might be interesting to check up who could have tried to prevent Martindale driving his cattle onto the reserve illegally. While I was fighting that blaze, a big herd of Bowleg M cattle were driven into the timber."

The lawman turned on the range boss, "Rufe," he said tonelessly, "I've knowed you for a long time, an' never knowed you to do anything very bad. Did you kill somebody in the hills yesterday?"

"No! You know better'n that, Hoke. This ranger's lyin', tryin' to get even for that Daggett affair. He's lyin', I tell you!"

"What about the watch, Rufe?"

Martindale looked bewildered. "It—it's been in a drawer at home. I haven't wore it for a long time. I can't see how. . . ."

"It must have been stolen," murmured the girl.

"Stole!" Martindale caught at it. "That's it, somebody stole that watch."

"Missed anything else, Rufe?" asked the sheriff."

"No-o-o." Martindale's eyes were bewildered, "but I ain't checked. . . ."

"Hilton!" The sheriff cut him off, fixing Cort with a steady gaze. "If I don't jail Rufe, who everybody knows ain't gonna run away, I suppose you'll file that in your information to the district commissioner and have me removed from office. Is that the idea?"

Cort nodded. "You know the answers."

A look of half concealed triumph, puzzling to Cort, flashed across the lawman's face.

"You see, Rufe, he's got me in a split stick. I can't do nothin' else but put you in a cell till this is straightened out."

Shadows crossed the pale eyes of the range boss. "Linn," he told the girl hoarsely. "Run over and get Judge Brouse. Tell him to hurry, it's a matter of bail. . . ."

"Sorry, Martindale," broke in Cort. "Murder is not a bailable offense."

"He's right, Rufe." That was Hoke Fenton. "You'll just have to hang and rattle till we can clear your name. I'd give my right arm to save you this, pardner, but long as I can't, I'll make you as comfortable as possible. Come on."

He led the stunned man away, and the girl turned to look at Cort, hatred filming her eyes. Then grief had swept the venom away and she crossed swiftly to him, to let her fingers rest on his arm.

"Are you doing this to get even?" she asked tightly.

"No."

"I will believe that," she said stoutly, "until you prove different. I'm Linn Martindale, his—his daughter. I want to ask you a question."

"What?"

"The murdered man—what is he like?"

Cort shuddered. "No one can ever know, miss. Fire is an awful thing; that's the lesson I hope to teach here." A rush of tears in her eyes shocked him. "Why do you ask?"

She struggled desperately for control.

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"I'm terribly worried about my brother, Dick. Dad sent him into town night before last, with a message for Mister Kessler. That message was never delivered. Dick hasn't come home. We can find nobody who has seen him. Do you think . . .?"

And then, as if fearful of his answer, she turned outside, and sped along the walk toward the Pioneer House.

CHAPTER THREE

Killer's Shadow

LATER, from the window of his hotel room, Cort saw the sheriff and coroner depart in a buckboard to claim the gruesome victim of the burn. Up until now he had looked only upon the criminal angle, but the fear and grief of the Martindale girl left him a little sick. Maybe it was Dick Martindale, though identification was impossible, and there had been nothing beside the body that would help. Cort shuddered.

Martindale had been ruthless, grasping, cruel maybe. But it shook Cort's confidence in the evidence to think of Martindale as the murderer of his own son. The same feeling seemed to have gripped Basalt City. Men gathered in knots along the walks, talking in whispers. Even the anvil of the busy blacksmith was stilled. And, somehow, Cort knew their resentment was running hotter against him than against the killer. He could feel it.

Dusk was shadowing the rangeland when the sheriff came back with the coroner, and the charred body wrapped in a tarpaulin. A jury was empaneled and sat in the undertaker's front room. Before the inquest, a queue of townsmen filed past the corpse, but not one was able to do more than guess at the identity.

Fenton brought Martindale from the jail. And, for a long, tense moment, the

range boss stood looking down at the dead, his sobbing daughter clinging to his arm. Then, with a dejected shake of the head, he turned away to take his seat before the jury.

The inquest didn't take long. Cort Hilton recited his morning experience on the burn, the finding of the evidence, and sign of cattle having been driven into the forest. Sheriff Fenton produced the watch and empty cartridges, telling the jury he had verified the ranger's report that the fire had been started, evidently to cover the crime.

With no hesitation, the jury found that: "John Doe, unknown, had come to his death at the hands of Rufus Martindale and Richard Roe, also unknown, by gunshot wounds."

Seemingly broken, Rufe Martindale went back to the jail with the sheriff. But whatever of pity Cort felt was for Linn Martindale, who wept as she left the undertaker's place on her way back to the hotel. And Cort suspected that her grief was less for her father than for the unidentified man he was charged with killing. More and more, the ranger found himself thinking that it was Dick Martindale; that some as yet unknown and terrible tragedy had caused the murder at the scene of the fire.

NEXT morning, drab skies wept soddenly—one thing, at least, that Cort could feel glad for. A good soaking would materially reduce the forest fire hazard. But aside from that one thing, he was worried and uneasy, though why he could not have told. Nearly all the day he sat at his hotel room window, watching the street and the jail.

There was unusual activity. Daggett and his freighters milled in and out of the transportation office. Judge William Brouse and Carson Kessler visited the jail, remained an hour, and left. A cavalcade of Bowleg M men, slickered and grim, lit down before the jailhouse and visited with their boss.

Along about sunset, the rain ceased and the skies cleared. And then Sheriff Fenton quit the jail, crossed the street and came up to see Cort. He was patently ill at ease. "About your witness, Joe Gaspard," he said with a forced air of confidence.

"How do you know he's my witness?"

Fenton smirked. "It's my business to know," he said proudly. "He's in danger. If I was you, I'd ride to your cabin as fast as God will let you, and hide the Injun out. The Bowleg M cowpunchers are sure worked up. They're talking about stringing Gaspard up to rub out his testimony against their boss. And you better be careful, too. Safe enough here in town, I reckon, but if they should happen to catch you out in the hills. . . ."

"Nice of you to warn me," said Cort tartly.

"Not at all, Hilton. Glad to cooperate with the Forest Service. Take care of yourself."

Cort stared after him when he was gone, puzzled by the visit. Fenton well knew that Joe Gaspard was keen and cagey as a wild animal, well able to take care of himself in his wild hills. Moreover, it seemed crazy that the lawman would go out of his way to save the breed whose testimony might hang the man who had made Fenton what he was. The answer lay somewhere else. Something was brewing.

Delving deep in his mind for Fenton's possible purpose, Cort was suddenly roused by a creaking of the floor outside his door. A knock drew him to his feet.

"Come in!"

The panel swung to reveal a hard-faced cowboy whose grin as he entered was not reflected in his snapping eyes. Behind him were two others. Cort knew them as Bowleg M men, and what he read in them sent chill streams of warning

along his veins. The door closed behind them, the key turning in the lock.

"Ranger," muttered the leader, "when you come into this country, we didn't like you or yore business. We still don't like you, savvy? When you framed our Old Man for killin' his own boy, you went too far."

"Who said it was his own boy?" countered Cort, tightly.

The man blinked, and any hope Cort might have had that the dead man was not Dick Martindale fled. "Never mind that, mister. You need to be taught your weight here." With no warning of his intent, he drove his fist into Cort's face.

Dropped to the floor like a poleaxed beef, the three of them hit Cort all at once. He had no chance at his gun, being pinned instantly by their hurtling bodies. Taken by surprise, and at a hopeless disadvantage as they beat at him with fists and knees, Cort relaxed, biding his chance. It came when his lack of resistance was interpreted as defeat. They half rose from him and Cort made a desperate attempt to gain his feet. He drove his fist into a contorted face, was knocked back against the bed. The rebound put him up and he met their charge with crashing blows. One clinched with him. Cort hammered the fellow down, wrenched loose from another and leaped for the door.

HE was twisting the key when they hit him, pinned him against the wall. A smashing blow on the jaw sent red fire through his brain. Strength poured from him and he would have fallen save that they held him up, punishing him mercilessly. His senses flickered. And then he was down, cringing as they drove their boots into his flesh. . . .

Cort came out of it, conscious that someone stood looking down at him. It hadn't been long, for the dusk was but little more advanced. His vision cleared and he looked into the scowling face of the hotel keeper.

"Mister Hilton," he said, with an injured air. "I pride myself on running a first class house. This brawling is a disgrace—"

He paused momentarily as Cort began a half-dazed explanation. "No, I don't care what it was; I simply cannot have it. I must ask you to leave."

Cort came slowly up, aching in every muscle and joint. The unfairness of this last stroke of his enemies filled him with rage, reimbued his punished spirit with a will to fight. The hotelman was acting under orders; Cort was certain of that. His jaw tightened.

"I'm sorry, Mister Yarnell," he said harshly. "If you try this, it puts you on the side of my enemies. And I'll have to include a whipping for you. If you want me out, take the necessary legal steps. I'm staying."

The man blinked, went out shaking his head and muttering. Cort locked the door, bathed his bruised face and straightened the room. Then he limped downstairs and got his horse from the stable. The whole town saw him ride west toward the Warbonnets in the half light. But Cort didn't go far. Where a headland hid him from the town, he dipped into a coulee and turned back. It was dark when he tied his pony behind the Pioneer House and climbed the rear staircase to his room.

A half moon rode high, lighting the street wanly. A light in the jailhouse attested that the sheriff lingered late. A Chinaman came with food for Martindale, and left. After a bit a puncher rode to the jail rack, tied his animal and bowlegged down to the Cowskin Saloon. So far, it was all innocent enough, and Cort felt the first taint of doubt.

Within an hour a buggy came swinging to the jail rack. Linn Martindale got out and entered the jail. After fifteen

minutes, she reappeared and drove swiftly away toward the Bowleg M. Nothing suspicious yet, but still Cort hung on . . . .

Now the light went out in the sheriff's office. Fenton came out, locked the door and disappeared. Convinced now that he had guessed wrong, the ranger was about to give up when he saw a slinking shadow round the jail, step into the saddle of the racked pony and rein off the main street, across lots. And Cort was running from his room, excitement rioting within him. One flash of a moonlit face had been enough. Rufe Martindale, killer, was loose in the night!

URGENCY sped Cort Hilton down the back stairs and into the saddle. He spurred across the street, loping past the jail to the dark alley, where faint hoofbeats drew him westward. At the border of town the wooden-floored bridge threw back echoes, and Cort gave determined chase. And, though for miles he had not so much as a glimpse of his quarry, the murmur of flying hoofs was like a tie.

Martindale had escaped, undoubtedly by collusion with his hand-picked sheriff. But what quest drew him toward the Warbonnets instead of toward the Bowleg M?

Past the burn Martindale loped; Cort could see him plainly now and was forced to drop back lest the range boss discover him. And now he turned left, caught the zig-zag trail leading up the mountain face—the trail to Hanging Meadow—Cort's headquarters.

Here, in the shadows of the pines at the foot of the trail, Cort halted, twisting restlessly as he waited for Martindale to gain the top of the switchback. He couldn't be discovered now, not until he learned what the range boss was up to. He hurled his pony up the slant as soon as the sounds ceased, knowing he was far behind.

If Martindale was not heading for Hanging Meadow, he had lost him, that was sure. But somehow it was all plain to Cort now. Fenton had liberated Martindale, with the understanding that he ride to the ranger cabin to commit a second murder, and maybe a third. Cort looked to the gun in his shoulder holster.

Where the trail crossed the rise at the border of the meadow, Cort quit his pony and went ahead on foot. Where the pines halted at the edge of Locks he paused. His cabin, little more than a hundred yards away, was dark. There was no sight or sound of Rufe Martindale; nor was there any feel of threat. He was at the point of quitting the shadows, certain he had guessed wrong, when he saw the rider come around the corner of the house, alight and move cautiously to the door. A gun glittered in his hand. It was Martindale; no doubt about it.

Cort was thinking about Joe Gaspard as he lashed from cover and sprinted toward the house. The breed was probably asleep in there, easy prey to this killer. The ranger's gun was in his hand now and his fighting blood was pumping close to the surface as he ran. Surprise grew to shock in him as the echoes of a knock came to his ears, as he heard Martindale's husky voice.

"Hilton! You in there, Hilton?"

"Tolling me out to kill me," reflected Cort, then he rounded his little house and plowed to a halt, hardly a rod from the range boss. Martindale whirled from the door, his gun jutting, his eyes striking through the pale moonglow.

"Hilton!" he said, and Cort thought he detected relief. "Man, but I'm glad to see you!"

"I can believe that," said Cort tartly, and then was startled to see the range boss sheathe his pistol. "Now what do you want?"

Suspecting a trick, he kept his gun level, advancing slowly.

Rufe Martindale stood looking at him,

patently puzzled, until Cort stood before him. He said: "I reckon you've got an explanation coming, Hilton. I—"

Flat and crackling, a voice struck from the rocks above, cutting him off. "There they are together, boys! Mow 'em down!"

It was Carson Kessler's voice; Cort knew that even as he whirled. Crimson muzzle flashes lashed at them. There was the wet smash of a bullet against flesh and Martindale cried weakly, flung up his hand and reeled down. The roaring blast of rifles flung solidly back from the naked scarps of Lookout Peak, and lead chunked soddenly into the cabin logs.

Then, suddenly, Cort was freed of the paralyzing inertia of surprise. He flung swift shots at those menacing flashes, darted for the shelter of the cabin, dragging the groaning range boss with him. Tugging the man's bulk over the threshold, he stepped on something that gave. He tripped and went down. His fingers got busy, exploring. It was a body—Joe Gaspard's.

The killers had been here before him!

Cort rose to slam the door. A bullet hit him in the thighs, seeming to cut the legs out from under him. He fell forward, prey to agony and shock, and hurled the panel shut. Then he was flattened on the floor as flocks of leaden hornets smashed through the door and into the wall behind.

CHAPTER FOUR

Steel-Tempered Fighting Men

FOR long moments Cort lay there dazed. Then he rallied, spurred by the knowledge he was bleeding, and staunched his wound. His legs were useless, and he pulled himself across the hewn floor with his fingers, reached his bunk. He jerked off a blanket, managed to sit up as he tore it into strips to bind his wounds. And through it all, the smash of guns was deafening. It shook the cabin to its very base logs.

Rufe Martindale crouched at the window, pallid moonlight glinting across his rock-like face and silvered hair, fire spurting from his palmed gun. And for the first time Cort saw the real Rufe Martindale, thrown back to the day when his teeth were always bared, his hackles always raised, as he battled for empire. Firing lulled outside and through the aching hush the old warrior's snarl struck.

"Kessler!" he barked. "Hear me, you yellow-striped polecat! I got tired an' soft an' listened to the wrong voices when I put you in charge of my business. You've played a slick game, Kessler, with a cold deck. You stood to win, but you lost yore taw when you missed me just now. It's a new deal, feller, an' I'm callin' you—with sixes."

Carson Kessler's laugh ran through the timber like a gong. "This is the end of you, Martindale. You signed your death-warrant when you fell for Fenton's idea to turn you loose. So you wanted to come up here and stop your boy Dick from killing the ranger, eh? Dick's dead, on the undertaker's slab, where you and the ranger and Joe Gaspard will be. That'll leave only Linn. She and I will hit it off fine."

"You damn snake!" bawled Martindale.

Triumph rang in Kessler's voice. "You were done when you made me executor of your estate. The Martindale Enterprises will soon be mine. Come on, boys, charge him! The old fool must be alone, the ranger down. A thousand dollars to the one who tallies him."

Gunfire again; high yells; then boot-heels pounding the earth as they came from three sides. Cort finished tying the knots, pulled himself to the window.

"Down but not out, Martindale," he said, leveling his gun over the sill. "Give 'em hell!"

The older man grunted, rocked the hammer. One of the half score darting shadows screamed, reeled and crashed. Cort aimed with cool deliberateness, pressed the trigger. His bullet caught a man in full flight, smashed him down.

"Great shootin', Ranger!" Admiration edged Martindale's applause.

Two more caught lead and swerved from the fight before the attackers decided the game wasn't worth the candle. There was a quick withdrawal, the timber swallowing them. With the heat of conflict chilled, Cort moaned from the stabbing pain of his bullet-seared thighs.

"You're hit, Hilton." Martindale's voice was calm. "How bad?"

"Holes in my legs," gritted Cort. "Not dangerous, but they sure cripple me. You?"

"Clean hole through the left shoulder. Painful enough to put some fight into these old bones. It's a bad mess, Hilton, an' I can see what you've been thinking of me. I've been an old fool but, before God, never a renegade! You heard Kessler, an' it must be plain to you how that watch came to be beside the—beside Dick's body."

The old man caught his breath. "They murdered him, Ranger, just as they figured to murder me and you. Just as they got poor Joe Gaspard. It would have left Kessler with only my daughter Linn, to handle, and his backtrail clean. One by one, he would have done away with Sheriff Fenton, Pete Daggett and any others who knew the truth. We've got to get out of here somehow, and—"

"Looks bad, Martindale," broke in Cort, who had been staring out into the moonglow as the range boss spoke. "They've discarded guns and are betting on—fire!"

Through the trees, gently swaying in the night breeze, struck the scattered beams of tiny blazes. Martindale stared,

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saw the flames leap up, then was on his feet, cursing as he darted to open the door.

"Don't, you fool!" Cort's warning lashed at the range boss, drew him back as a hail of lead struck through. "Get down!"

Firing ceased. The beat of hoofs came to the ears of the two beleaguered men, and Kessler's acrid taunt. "Burn, damn you! Or come out and take lead. I don't care which."

After that, there was only the increasing crackle of hungry flames and the growing smother of wind-borne smoke. Rufe Martindale stirred, groaned: "The damn' white Injun. He's got us trapped! Their fire will streak across here an' eat this cabin in one gulp. If we go out that door, they'll mow us down. And Linn. . . ." He choked.

Cort stared at the gathering wall of flame, making the yard light as day. "There's one chance," he muttered. "Straight out from the back door, Martindale, is the foot of the trail to the peak."

"What we waitin' for?" The old man came up, poised.

"It's you for it, alone," said the ranger. "I can't walk, and you'll never be able to drag me over those cliffs. Go on, Martindale. Get word of this to the law and make Kessler pay. Then throw your weight behind the Forest Service; it's something you can do for the good of the whole basin. . . ."

"But you, Hilton?"

"Don't mind me. I'm done. It's up to you now. But hurry! In ten minutes the heat will burn you right off that goat trail."

The range boss hesitated. "They can shoot me off right now," he frowned. "That whole mountainside is lighted up."

"The fire's driven them back," countered Cort. "Go on; you've got to take the chance."

Lashed on by the ranger's urgency, the old man capitulated. He took Cort's hand. "Leavin' you makes me feel like the murderer you thought me, Hilton," he said. "But you're right. One of us has to get out. I'll try my damndest to get help back in time. If only you could—"

"Leave the back door open," snapped Cort. "I'll go as far as I can. If I can't make it, there's always my six-shooter. Now get going!"

Martindale darted to the rear, let himself out. And a moment lated Cort heard rattling stones that attested his movement up the steep trail. The fire was singing in the tops now and the air was smoke-filled, uncomfortably warm. Holstering his gun, the ranger dragged himself along the floor. If he could get outside, behind the cabin. . . .

Pain swept through his legs in sickening waves as he inched across the floor. But life was sweet and pain is a small price for even the slightest hope. One thing comforted him. Whatever he went through could not approach the agony of Rufe Martindale's spirit. By the cow-country code, it had taken the braver man to leave a partner like this.

So Cort dragged himself along, sweat bursting from every pore, driving muscles unused to such effort. He must hurry if he was to reach the overhang of the cliff and the deep eroded cleft where water dripped and from which he had his cabin supply.

The fire was booming now, its voice made more terrible for him than for most because he fully knew its horror.

He clawed himself across the threshhold, fell the scant foot to the earth and lay shaken, gasping. Then he was moving again, struggling for breath, about at the end of his rope. That was when he paused from his unequal labors, attracted by the whisper of a scream striking through the voice of the burning forest.

Cort raised himself on his arms, listening. It came again: "Dad! Dad, where are you . . . ?"

Cort caught the flash of movement in the darkness along the cliff base. And knew it for Linn Martindale. "Here!" he cried, fear and joy clashing within him. "Over here, Linn!"

He sobbed as he saw her turning toward him, knowing all at once the comfort of a human presence in that valley of death.

CHAPTER FIVE

Out of the Smoke

THE girl, running hard, stumbled and fell, picked herself up and came to him, kneeling. She was very pale. "Cort!" she gasped. "You—you're shot. Dad . . .?"

The ranger pointed up the trail. "He's all right, Linn. He's headed up the trail for help."

"And he left you here to die? That's not like him."

He could grin at her. "It isn't what he would have chosen," he told her. "But someone had to go, and my legs are no good. This is bigger now than any one of us. You see, lady, all our troubles—killings, fires, violations of forest law—all can now be laid to a man your father trusted."

Her face was bleak. "You don't have to tell me," she said bitterly. "You're speaking of Kessler. Tonight he intercepted me on my way to the ranch and brought me here. You see, he's been very sweet to me, too sweet. He proposed marriage and I refused him."

A sob shook her. "Maybe that's why he told me everything he was planning. He tied me and rode away, after setting the fire. If he had been a range man, I'd be dead now, but his knots didn't hold. Now I'm here to—to do what my dad would have done, if he could have been in two places at one time!" She knelt.

"Put your arms about my neck, and show me the foot of the trail."

He shook his head. "First, you couldn't carry my hundred and eighty pounds. Second, fire would roast us both before we got half way. And last, you needn't take the risk."

He pointed to the cleft under the dripping cliff, explained his hope. Even as she caught the idea, her hands went under his arms and she was dragging him. Her strength, even though fortified by fear and desperation, amazed him. Half way to their objective, she gave way, let him down and slumped beside him, gasping. And in the flare of shooting flame, he saw her face, lined, fearful.

The heat was an inferno now. As though it were oil-soaked, the roof of the cabin ignited, sending a pillar of fire skyward.

"The time's short," said Cort bitterly. "Better get under the cliff and let me crawl there the best I can. Hurry!"

"Like hell!" she snapped. "Dad may have had a reason for leaving you, but I haven't. I'm rested now. Come on."

She grabbed him again, backing as she tugged. Step by step, Cort's agony was tempered by the brave picture she made. Slim, pantherish, capable, yet all woman to her fingertips. And a chip off the old block.

She couldn't help much, and the punishment of it left him too hazy fully to appreciate her struggle. The cool caress of water roused him and he rolled into the shallow drip, crowding himself far back into the dim coolness.

"Put up the board over the spring," he managed, "and crawl in here. Quick!"

THE waterlogged board shed the reflection of the holocaust and they were not prey to the blasting heat that seared every living thing in Hanging Meadow. Side by side, they lay in the chill water, the drip from above a welcome thing in a chaos of heat, smoke and death. It numbed Cort's pain, lifted his spirits. He found himself looking into soft hazel eyes.

"Scared, Linn?"

"Terribly."

"Good girl—so am I!" He could feel the wild beating of her heart, threw an arm about her and kissed her on the lips. Her response was wine in his veins, and then she had laid her cheek against his breast, closing her eyes as if in contented sleep.

The cabin burned to ash and the muttering of the fire receded into the upper reaches of Lookout Peak. Black night settled, the moon wan after the fierce glare of the fire. Choking smoke thinned as the breeze freshened. Cramped and chilled, the girl quit their life-giving refuge. Cort rolled out beside her. Together, they looked over the grim desolation of the once-lovely meadow. The pile of ash and char that had been his cabin held Cort's gaze.

"You've proved to the basin just what the Forest Service is, and they'll respect it all the more," she murmured. "Most of your troubles are over now, Cort. You'll have a new cabin, and. . . ."

"I was thinking of poor Joe Gaspard," he broke in. "He paid the full price."

"Joe Gaspard!" She snorted. "Dad fired him once for stealing. And his murder only strengthens my belief that there is such a thing as justice. You know why Kessler killed him? Because he knew too much; he boasted of it and I heard the shot that killed him. He was the one who went into our house and stole dad's watch. He planted it after watching Kessler murder my brother. He got just what he had coming!"

They sat there, talking over the angles of Kessler's frame-up until the moon went down. There were no bird voices in that

desolation when dawn broke. But with the sun, fogged by the fumes of a fire that burned itself out on the rocky sides of Lookout Mountain, came grim-faced horsemen across the burned sod.

Rufus Martindale, gaunt with worry, fatigue and dread, led them. One arm was in a sling but he seemed not to notice as he folded Linn to his broad breast. Then he was looking down at the ranger, tears in his eyes.

Cort said: "Never looked for you to find help this quick, Mister Martindale. How—?"

"Thanks to you again, Hilton," said the range boss. "I was about done up, tryin' to beat the fire up the trail, when your horse came up behind me. I just about killed him getting down to the ranch, but don't you worry. There'll be lots of horses and anything else I've got for you. I'm glad to see you through this hell. And that grateful to you for saving my gal. . . ."

"Saving her?" Cort looked up into Linn's warmly smiling eyes. "She saved me, gave me the only chance I had on earth. And here I am, without horses or cattle or anything else to show my everlasting gratitude."

Linn was flushing, smiling. "You'll pay, Ranger," she told him. "I warn you; I'm enrolling at the new Forest Service headquarters for a course in forestry. You see, I lost out while you were teaching dad and the other die-hards."

The range boss cleared his throat stridently. "Boys, quit talkin' about that hangin' an' get this boy onto a horse. . . ."

"Hanging?" Cort sat up, staring. "What hanging?"

Rufe Martindale blinked, turned bleak eyes toward the smouldering mountain side. "We run plumb into Carse Kessler an' his men, on our way in," he said, morosely. "Had quite a brush, and wound up with Kessler, Pete Daggett an' Sheriff

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Fenton. I reckon I could have talked these boys out of stringing them cutthroat renegades up, but not by bein' true to what I felt myself." His eyes, flashing suddenly to the ranger, filled with dull fire. "You got any forest laws you want to throw at me for that?" he barked. His face seemed set in marble.

Their eyes met, locked. And for a long minute Cort tried to stare down the last intolerance, the last antagonism, of a man who had known only the law of the fang and who had lived accordingly.

When he made no answer, Rufe Martindale covered his emotion with a vast clearing of his throat, a quick pivoting and a rough-edged order to his waiting punchers.

"Don't stand there gawpin', like hen buzzards at a carcass! Get this ranger on a horse an' start him for Basalt City an' the medico—"

"One can ride for the doctor," corrected Linn firmly. "Cort Hilton goes straight to the Bowleg M, where I can look after him. You think I'm trusting him to one of the town nurses? Not much! Now hurry!" The girl's happiness sent her hands flying.

Rufe Martindale turned back to Cort, and a hint of humor lurked about his wide mouth as he shrugged. "Wimmen are funny critters, Hilton," he murmured. "When they make up their minds, there ain't no augerin' with 'em. God help you; it looks like you're in for it!"

Cort laughed softly, his first since coming to the Shoshone National Forest. The ugly darkness of conflict, violence and near-despair had given way to a dawn so splendidly promising as to dwarf his fondest hopes, a reward so glorious as to leave him speechless. . . .

THE END

(*Continued from page 115*)

Johnny nodded grimly. "Let's go," he said.

"May I see the glasses, please?" Ellen said.

She seemed very boyish in the levis she had bought in town that day, with only the rounded curves of her blouse and stray wisps of brown hair under her sombrero to betray her sex. Very boyish, and yet very lovely.

She lowered the glasses at last. Her eyes held bewilderment, incredulity.

"What are those men doing there?" She stared at Johnny Bates. "What are they doing there?" She pounded on the saddlehorn.

"*Quien sabe?*" Johnny said.

"*Quien sabe?* What do you mean by that?" the girl flung at him.

"Who knows?"

CHAPTER FIVE

When Death Stands at the Door

THERE were better than five hundred cattle in the holding pasture at the home ranch. They were a rangy, rawboned lot—ranniky brush cows, spooky yearlings, old mossy-horns. Most of them carried the Triangle O iron. However, there were a few Walking A animals, and a number of mavericks.

"How will we brand the mavericks," Ellen asked Johnny Bates. She seemed to put everything up to him. He wished she didn't. It was going to make it tough if he failed.

"That's between you an' Stormy," Johnny said.

Ellen Overstreet turned her face toward Stormy. She seemed troubled, doubtful. Then the little frown was gone; her jaw tightened. "We'll brand half of them Triangle O," she said, "and half Walking A."

Kinda like she was figgerin' on always sharin' things with Stormy Adams, Johnny thought.

They branded the mavericks in a squeeze chute, and Tio and old Mose went back to Tortuga Tank with some lead oxen to bring in the *ladinos.*

This was done by necking an outlaw steer to a gentle ox. The patience and brute strength of the ox wore down the wild one, as the ox worried his wayward brother toward the home corral, where he knew cottonseed cake was waiting to reward him.

After supper, Stormy said, "Reckon I'll head back home."

Ellen looked at Johnny. After a little, they walked down to the corral.

"We come by your place the other day," Johnny said.

Stormy glared at him; then finished cinching up.

"You had company," the girl said. Her voice was cool, steady. "They were Bill Rust's men."

Stormy bared his teeth in a crooked grimace. "So yuh think I'm mixed up with that bunch?" he snarled.

"Yuh don't keep very good company," Johnny said.

"Damn a sneakin' range detective!" Stormy flung out, and vaulted into the saddle.

The run of his horse's hoofs died in the night. The girl's face was pale in the thin darkness. She stared after Stormy.

"Yuh like that ornery galoot, don't yuh?" Johnny said slowly.

"Yes, I do!" the girl cried. And she added after a moment, "I—I don't know why, Johnny. Perhaps it is because he seems so lost."

Johnny guessed a woman savvied men, the same as they did babies—knew instinctively what they needed.

"He's had so much tragedy and heartbreak," Ellen went on. "I pitied him that first morning." Suddenly she caught Johnny Bates by his two arms. "You

don't think he is mixed up with Bill Rust? He has every reason in the world to hate him. You—you don't think he is bad, do you?"

"Them rustlers was spendin' money free in the Bienvenida Bar that night," Johnny said gruffly. "None of 'em had to hock their six-shooters to buy whiskey, like Stormy."

Ellen kissed him then, square on the mouth. Her lips were warm, sweet.

JOHNNY BATES rested his hands on the saddlehorn and stared out across the brush. He was worried. Stumpy and Sunset sided him. Sunset shifted his lean frame. There was the soft creak of leather.

They had baited the trap with five hundred head of cattle. Bill Rust and his gunpack were at the Walking A, ten miles away. Johnny almost wished they had held the cattle at Tortuga Tank, but that would have split their forces.

There wasn't enough of them to guard the herd and the home ranch both. Johnny remembered how Sol Segrin had looked at the girl that day. Bill Rust's eyes had been afire. They would as soon have Ellen Overstreet as the cattle.

Perhaps tonight, tomorrow night or next week, Bill Rust and his riders would come in on them. They would utilize every trick at their command to outwit the law.

This was no ordinary rustling job. It went deeper than that. On the shoulders of Sunset and himself rested the responsibility of rebuilding the foundation of what had once been a great cattle ranch.

They were bringing law into the brush. The fight with Bill Rust meant either discouraging rustling for a long time to come, or admitting that the Association was unable to put down with the lawlessness on the Border.

A cold, intangible something was astir in the darkness. The cattle sensed it. They were up and on the move. An animal in the pasture bawled. Somewhere, far off in the brush, a *ladino* answered, a weird, blood-curdling sound.

Johnny's restive eye went back toward the ranch house. Two squares of light lay against the gloom, warm and yellow as gold. It was close to midnight then.

They rode along the fence, three silent shadows. A steer spooked away and crashed into a thicket. Sunset swore, "I'd herd sheep before I'd work cattle in this horned-over backyard of hell!"

They stopped not a hundred yards from the house. A shadow passed in front of one of the lighted windows. Ellen, Johnny guessed. She had been down to the corrals when they'd saddled up. Then he heard hoofs pounding like a muffled drum-roll on the road from town.

They came closer, then died out in the ranch yard. A door opened, loosing a brief flood of light, and closed over a woman's silhouette.

Johnny dismounted by the corrals and went toward the kitchen door. A horse was blowing near the house.

Johnny said, "Ellen!" And waited. Except for the breathing of the winded animal, there wasn't a sound. He pushed on into the kitchen.

A coal-oil lamp was burning on the table. He heard the clock ticking. Funny how a thing like that could fill a house.

A door was half open. There was a light in the living room. The slow tread of his boot-heels echoed through the rambling structure.

He stopped on the threshold beyond, every nerve in his lank frame snapping taut at the strange picture before him.

AUNT SOPHRONY was sitting stiffly erect beside the table, the light from a big Rochester lamp flooding over her. Some fancy work was in her lap. She seemed as cold and remote as a snow-capped peak.

Ellen was standing near the horsehair sofa. Her face was chalk-white, her hands clenched.

Rose, the girl Johnny had talked with in the saloon in Gun River that night, was there, too. She looked as though she might have taken two or three steps into the room and turned into a statue.

Johnny's eye was moving fast now. Every detail stood out like a steel engraving. The patterns in the big Navajo rugs, the oil paintings of frontier scenes, the hearth, the smoke-smudged fieldstone fireplace, the pictures of Amos Overstreet and his wife on the mantle, the old Henry rifle hung above.

In the jog beside the fireplace stood Sol Segrin, six-shooters leveled. His sombrero was low. Under the brim two bright, vicious eyes were watching.

Funny what a man noticed times like this. Bandoleer belt, chocolate-colored chaps with silver conchas and buckle, the boots and spurs, holsters emptied.

In the arch of the doorway that opened to a room just to the right of Segrin was Turk Copin, the big .45 in his hand cocked.

Sol Segrin's lips curled into a leer. His voice cracked against the dead silence. "High up, brand-hawk! Fast!"

Johnny raised his hands, and winced inwardly at the twinge of pain that reminded him of his slow-mending arm.

"Yuh sure walked into it nice," Turk Copin said.

Ellen's voice came to him, low, steady. "I'm sorry we couldn't warn you."

The hard, wise eyes of the girl they called Rose touched him. "Well, if it isn't the cowboy detective himself!"

That painted face, the cheap, gaudy dress, the ornate slippers, the wind-blown hair—these things spoke to Johnny Bates of a blind rush from saloon to saddle. Dust and disarray told of those long, hard-ridden miles from town.

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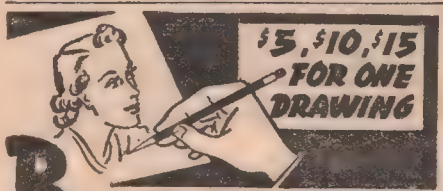

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Queer how a man's thoughts ran. Johnny saw another picture. This great room filled with laughter and music. A pretty girl out from Boston—Rose swinging in the arms of Stormy Adams!

And now death was here, rattling its bones under the rafters.

CHAPTER SIX

Gun-Gospel and a Painted Angel

SOL SEGRIN was saying to the girl, "What in hell are you doin' here?"

"That's my business," Rose said. "I earn my keep, even if I am Bill Rust's wife, and I don't have to answer to anybody."

"Bill Rust will tear yore heart out!" snarled Segrin.

"I'm an old friend of the family," the girl said, with a brazen toss of her head. "Isn't that right, Ellen?"

"Yes, Rose." Ellen Overstreet's voice was steady.

Suddenly there were wild yells in the direction of the holding pasture. Rifle shots cracked open the silence, and the sound of hoofs was like distant thunder.

"There go yore cattle," Segrin said, watching Johnny Bates over the leveled guns. "*Gracias* fer roundin' 'em up!"

"Why don't you tell them the rest, Sol?" Rose said. "Why not say there are extra horses to take these women south of the Border?"

"Shut yore damn mouth," snarled Segrin.

Rose walked across the room, swinging her slim hips in that tight, form-revealing dress with easy insolence—just like she was parading to the bar in town, Johnny thought.

She stood beside Ellen. "I'm sorry I didn't get here in time to warn you." Her voice had lost its hardness. "I tried—for old times' sake—but that jug-head

didn't have any bottom. I guess it was the worst bronc at the livery barn."

Turk Copin stared at her. Suddenly something seemed to take light in his scowling eyes, as though, perhaps, he was piecing things out in his mind.

"A couple of the gang were in town," Rose went on. "I overheard something they said, so I turned on the come-thither." She raised her eyebrows. "One of them loosened up before they headed south to join the rest of the bunch."

"They'll kill you!" Ellen gasped, and glanced fearfully at the gunmen. "You shouldn't have done it, but I love you for trying, Rose."

"You and I were friends," the dance hall girl said. "And your grandfather and his wife took me into their home here, and treated me as though I was one of their own. I spent the happiest days of my life under this roof. I never forgot it."

Turk Copin's jaw fell slack; then tightened savagely.

"Yuh was standin' next to that damned range detective in the saloon that night!" he cried suddenly. "*You* was the one that tipped him off!"

"Took you fools a long time to figure it out." Bold as brass, she was.

One of Segrin's guns moved to cover the girl. She tossed her head. "Go ahead! Shoot, Sol!"

She was like a doll, there in the lamplight, Johnny thought, with her painted, waxen features and spangled dress. A little frayed, mebbe, and soiled, but beautiful nevertheless.

Aunt Sophrony was watching, her eyes as bright as a chipmunk's. She got to her feet slowly. Her glance flicked toward Johnny with some vital message.

Then she glared at Sol Segrin. "Stop pointing those guns at folks, you heathen!" Her voice was like ice.

"Shut up, old woman!"

"In the name of the great Jehovah and the Continental Congress—"

The fighting words of Ethan Allen. Johnny got it.

Then Aunt Sophrony, looking like the Spirit of '76, hit the table with all of her might.

THE lamp jumped. The flame puffed up the chimney. In that brief moment before blackness came, Johnny saw Rose step between Ellen and Sol Segrin, saw the dart of her hand to the V of her daringly low-cut dress and had a glimpse of the derringer in her slim fingers.

Johnny's hand hit for his Colt. The next instant the room rocked to the concussion of blasting guns.

Muzzle-flame scratched the inky night. One quick volley, like the tight-packed reports of the guns of a firing squad; then the sound of a body hitting the floor, the scratch of spurs against wood. . . . And silence.

Johnny stood tense, every nerve walking a tight wire He wanted to speak to Ellen, make sure she was unhurt, but he was afraid.

He thought he had killed Turk Copin. He didn't know about Segrin. The girl had fired at him, but the segundo's guns had been crashing. He guessed Rose must be dead too.

Ellen spoke then in a tense whisper: "Rose—*Rose!*"

"I—I'm all—right," Rose said. Johnny could hear her breathing. It didn't sound right.

He struck a match. The flame showed two pale faces, like cameo's against satin —Ellen's and Aunt Sophrony's.

Turk Copin was sprawled face down beside the hearth. Sol Segrin was sitting on the floor with his back against the wall, still clutching his two black .45's. His eyes were open, but it seemed that he couldn't speak or move.

Rose had crumpled to her knees. She looked at Ellen and smiled. Johnny knew when he glanced at her that her life, like the match in his hand, was close to being burned out.

His ears picked up the sounds of the running fight beyond the ranch. Hoofs slammed in the yard, and there were yells. He recognized Bill Rust's voice.

He was shouting, "Sol! Sol, damn yuh, where are yuh?"

Johnny ran back toward the kitchen.

Dust rolled under the hoofs of horses in the ranch yard. . . .

A bullet crashed through a window pane. He blew out the lamp on the table and jerked open the door, his gun jutting before him.

One man he wanted, in his law preachment in this backyard of hell, and that was Bill Rust, outlaw boss.

Dust rolled from under the hoofs of the horses in the ranch yard. There were slamming reports, and stabbing, yellow lances, like deadly shooting stars close to earth.

Johnny moved toward the gear room, keeping in the deeper shadows, his eyes hunting Bill Rust. Suddenly he saw the buckskin with the silver-studded gear, and heard Bill Rust's frantic voice shouting.

"Sol! Where in God's name are yuh?"

Johnny swung toward the outlaw. "Segrin's got his belly full of lead," he said in a hard, flat tone.

A flash leaped at him. His Colt kicked in his hot palm. He was moving, bearing away to his left. Bill Rust fired again at the shadowy target, and something laid hold of Johnny's vest, like an urgent hand, trying to hurry him down to death.

Johnny's Peacemaker Colt blasted again. The outlaw leader swayed, clawed at the saddlehorn. The buckskin crow-hopped away from the lean rangeman.

Bill Rust slued sideways and pitched to earth.

The battle beyond ended and flowed with savage fury. Johnny heard old Mose bellowing like a brush steer, sending out its blood call. A horse crashed down, screaming. Its rider staggered up, only to wither before the hot flame of a .30-30.

Leaderless, the remainder of the rustler band spurred away, a bullet-riddled fragment of the wild bunch that had so long terrorized Gun River cowmen.

JOHNNY BATES slowly holstered his six-shooter. His shoulders sagged, and he felt like a man at the end of a long, gruelling ride in the storm and blackness.

He knew no particular elation. It was just another job, carrying with it heartache and hurt. Suddenly Sunset was there, gripping his arm.

"Gawd, I was scared, Johnny. You in there, with guns tearin' the house apart. I tried to get through, but them hellions was bustin' in on us from all directions."

"I know," Johnny said. "It was another bushwhack."

Tio Diego, old Mose and Stumpy came up—all talking at once. Stormy was with them. Johnny stared at him.

"Where'd you come from?"

"Look, Johnny, yuh got to listen to me." Stormy's words were driven by desperation. "Yuh got to listen to me, whether yuh believe me or not."

"All right, get it off your chest."

"I got in a jam a year ago," Stormy said. "I killed a man. We'd been drinkin'. He made a crack about Rose. You know.

"Bill Rust covered me up. Reckon he figgered he could use a no-good son. He always worked it so men were in debt to him; then he'd use 'em. Him an' his bunch stayed at my place when they felt like it. I didn't give a damn. I was drunk most of the time anyhow.

"When Rust an' the gang started out tonight, I trailed 'em. They never let on to me what was up, but I had a pretty good idea they was goin' to punch them cattle for the Border.

"I come on Tio an' Mose off here a piece, an' he hit for the ranch."

"All right," Johnny said absently. There was a light in the living room now. Johnny saw Ellen when she struck a match in the kitchen. He went toward the door.

She turned at his step. Her face was haggard; she was trembling. Her eyes went past him, and he heard Stormy say, "Ellen!"

"Please come in," the girl said. "Come in quietly. Rose is dying."

"Rose?" Stormy said. "She's here?"

Ellen nodded, and led the way.

ROSE lay on the horsehair sofa. Aunt Sophrony was holding her hand, stroking her forehead. Stormy dropped beside her, tears streaming down his leathery cheeks.

"Rose! It's me—Stormy."

She smiled at him. After a long time, she said, "We had some—grand times—here—didn't we? . . ."

"Yes, Rose."

"You don't—hate me?"

"I never did!"

"I'm glad. I couldn't—help it. You see—Stormy—I loved Bill. . . ." After a little, she said, "Where is he?"

"He's dead," Johnny said, and swal-

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5.25-17	2.90	1.35
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
5.50-17	3.35	1.40
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$30 WEEKLY. GROW MUSHROOMS. Cellar, shed. We buy 35c lb. WORLD'S LARGEST COMPANY. 40 PAGE BOOK FREE. Mushrooms, Dept. 756, 1927 Third, Seattle, Wash.

Old Money Wanted

PREMIUMS PAID for Gold, Silver, Copper Coins. Send dime for booklet. A. French, Route 1, Troy, N. Y.

Certain Large Cents worth $750.00; Small Cents $12.00; Nickels $250.00; Dimes $300.00. Send 15c for newest 1940 complete 36 page illustrated buying book. AMERICAN COINS, Box 3507-T, Cleveland, Ohio.

FOREIGN Banknote and Coin Catalogue 10c. N. Shultz, Salt Lake, Utah.

Patent Attorneys

INVENTORS—Time counts. Don't delay. Protect your idea with a Patent. Get 48 page Patent Guide Free. No charge for preliminary information. Write today. CLARENCE A. O'BRIEN, Registered Patent Attorney, OD26 Adams Building, Washington, D. C.

-PATENT your invention. Your ideas may be worth money. Responsible firm—65 years' experience. WRITE FOR FREE BOOKS of patent facts. C. A. Snow & Co., 604 Snow Building, Washington, D. C.

lowed the lump that was in his throat

The girl's face wasn't hard now. It was beautiful, Johnny thought, for peace was there. Her eyes found his. The fire was burning low. "That makes it easier," she said. "I—I won't be afraid of the dark now. And perhaps—we can be happy—on some far-away range . . ."

And then, in a twinkling, she was gone

Ellen kissed her still, white lips. A moment later she was sobbing in Stormy's arms.

They were married when the work was done that fall—Stormy Adams and Ellen—and Johnny and Sunset went back to Texas for the wedding. That night, again there was music and laughter in the old ranch house, and the sound of dancing feet.

Johnny Bates was a little sad, for engraved in his heart were the images of two brave women One of them he had loved. And as he drove the brand-law home to rustler breed on far and smoky trails, there always lingered before him the faces of Ellen Overstreet, and Rose, of the Bienvenida Bar.

THE END

Classified Advertising

(Continued)

Patents

PATENTS SECURED. Low cost. Book and advice free. L. F. Randolph, Dept. 573, Washington, D. C.

Photo Finishing

ROLLS DEVELOPED—25c coin. Two 5 x 7 Double Weight Professional Enlargements, 8 gloss prints. CLUB PHOTO SERVICE, Dept. 16, La Crosse, Wis.

Poems—Songwriters

Songwriters. Interesting Proposition. Write PARAMOUNT SONG-RECORDING STUDIO, L-44, Box 190, Hollywood, Calif.

SONGWRITERS: Send your poem today for immediate consideration. RICHARD BROTHERS, 30 Woods Building, Chicago.

SONG POEMS WANTED TO BE SET TO MUSIC. Free examination. Send poems to McNeil, Master of Music, 510-A So. Alexandria, Los Angeles, Calif.

WANTED—Poems for musical setting. Submit for consideration. Phonograph transcriptions made. Keenan's Studio, PP. Box 2140, Bridgeport, Conn.

Salesmen Wanted

IF YOU ARE AMBITIOUS you can make good money with a Rawleigh Route. We help you get started. No experience needed. Steady work for right man. Write Rawleigh's, Box D-2-PBL, Freeport, Ill.

Calling All Cars!

A MYSTERIOUS DISCOVERY SAVES UP TO 30% on GASOLINE!

OR COSTS NOTHING TO TRY

Answer this call! Investigate this remarkable discovery that trims dollars off gasoline bills —gives you worthwhile gas savings—more power — greater speed — quicker pickup — faster acceleration. Proven so efficient, it is guaranteed to save up to 30% and give better performance or the trial costs you nothing.

Automatic Supercharge Principle

Vacu-matic is *entirely different!* It operates on the supercharge principle by automatically adding a charge of extra oxygen, drawn free from the outer air, into the heart of the gas mixture. It is entirely automatic and allows the motor to "breathe" at the correct time, opening and closing *automatically* as required to save dollars on gas costs.

VACU-MATIC Scores Again

SETS NEW COAST-TO-CHICAGO RECORD

BOB McKENZIE
TRANSCONTINENTAL AUTOMOBILE CHAMPION
COAST TO COAST

Vacu-matic Carburator Co.
7617 W. State Street
Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

Dear Sirs:

Having just completed a new speed record between Los Angeles and Chicago, driving a Chevrolet equipped with a Vacu-matic carburetor control, I thought you might be interested in knowing some of the facts and the important part Vacu-matic played in the success of the run.

The distance covered was 2322 miles in thirty-nine hours and forty-two minutes, officially timed by Western Union, which gave me an average speed of 59.7 M.P.H. based on elapsed time and with the Vacu-matic averaged 18-1/2 miles per gallon on gasoline.

Before leaving Los Angeles, we made several test runs both with and without the Vacu-matic, and the tests proved that Vacu-matic increased my gas mileage 3-1/2 miles per gallon at the driving speed of 50 M.P.H. and also very noticeable increase in both acceleration and power.

Yours very truly,

In addition to establishing new mileage records on cars in all sections of the country, the Vacu-matic has proven itself on thousands of road tests and on dynamometer tests which duplicate road conditions and record accurate mileage and horse power increases.

You, too, can make a road test with Vacu-matic on your car and prove its worthwhile gas savings to your entire satisfaction.

Learn all about this remarkable discovery. Get the facts NOW!

Sworn Proof of Gas Savings

This certifies that I have carefully read 300 original letters received from Vacu-matic users testifying to gas savings up to 30%, many reporting added power, smoother running, and quicker pick-up. These letters are just a small part of the larger file of enthusiastic user letters that I saw at the company offices.

Signed Marcus J. Clarty
Notary Public

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Vacu-matic offers a splendid opportunity for unusual sales and profits. Every car, truck, tractor, and motorcycle owner a prospect. Valuable territories now being assigned. If you help us introduce it to a friend, you can obtain your own free. Check and mail coupon today.

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Vacu-matic is constructed of six parts assembled and fused into one unit, adjusted and *sealed at the factory.* Nothing to regulate. Any motorist can install in ten minutes. The free offer coupon will bring all the facts. Mail it today!

The Vacu-matic Co. **Wauwatosa, Wis.**

SEND THIS *Free Offer* COUPON

THE VACU-MATIC COMPANY
7617-500 W. State St., Wauwatosa, Wis.

Please send full particulars about VACU-MATIC, also how I may obtain one for my own car FREE. This does not obligate me in any way.

Name .....

Address .....

City..... State.....

☐ Check here if interested in Agency Proposition.

At left: ACTUAL COLOR PHOTOGRAPH. James Callis, North Carolina farmer, shows Miss Agnes Williams—from a near-by farm—a tobacco plant in flower, from the fine crop he has raised by U. S. Government methods.

"UNCLE SAM'S

new ideas helped make tobacco better than ever

..and Luckies bought the top-notch grades!" says Luther Herring, 12 years a buyer!

Q. "You say Uncle Sam helped tobacco farmers?"

MR. HERRING: "Yes. Even though crops vary with weather, U. S. Government methods have made tobacco better than ever during the past few years."

Q. "And Luckies get this better tobacco?"

MR. H: "Luckies buy the finer grades, and always did."

Q. "That's a strong statement."

MR. H: "Well, I see first hand that they buy the prettier lots of tobacco. That's why Luckies are the 2-to-1 favorite with independent tobacco men. And that's why I've smoked them myself for 21 years."

Try Luckies for a week. You'll find they're easy on your throat—because the "Toasting" process takes out certain harsh throat irritants found in all tobacco. You'll also find out why—

WITH MEN WHO KNOW TOBACCO BEST —IT'S LUCKIES 2 TO 1

Have you tried a LUCKY lately?

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